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The Triumph of Death

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CONTENTS

	BOOK I	PAGE
THE PAST		I
	BOOK II	
HIS FATHER'S HOUSE		54
	BOOK III	
THE HERMITAGE		118
	BOOK IV	
THE NEW LIFE		148
	BOOK V	
TEMPUS DESTRUENDI		228
	BOOK VI	
THE INVINCIBLE		276

BOOK I—THE PAST

I

SEEING a group of men leaning over the parapet and looking down into the street below, Ippolita gave a cry and stopped short.

‘What has happened?’

With a little involuntary gesture of fear, she laid her hand on Giorgio’s arm to hold him back.

‘Some one must have thrown himself over the parapet,’ said Giorgio, after watching the men for a moment. ‘Would you like to turn back?’ he added.

She hesitated, divided between fear and curiosity.

‘No,’ she answered; ‘let us go on.’

They proceeded along by the parapet to the end of the path, Ippolita unconsciously quickening her pace as they drew nearer to the group of onlookers.

It was an afternoon in March, and the Pincio was well-nigh deserted. From time to time some sound was borne faintly through the dull, heavy atmosphere.

‘Yes, that is it,’ said Giorgio; ‘some one has committed suicide.’

They came to a standstill on the outskirts of the crowd. Every eye was riveted on the pavement below. They were mostly workmen out of employ; not one of the different faces expressed either pity or distress, while the immobility of their stare lent a certain bovine stupidity to their eyes.

A boy ran up, eager to see the sight; but before he had time to lean over, some one in the group called out in an in-

definable tone of triumph and sarcasm, as if the man rejoiced at the other's disappointment—

‘Too late; they have carried him away!’

‘Where to?’

‘To Santa Maria del Popolo.’

‘Dead?’

‘Yes—dead.’

Another individual, his clothes mouldy with age and dirt, and with a large woollen comforter round his throat, leaned far over the parapet, and, taking his pipe from his mouth, called: ‘What’s that down there?’

His mouth, all drawn awry and seamed and scarred as if by a burn, was distorted by a constant flow of bitter saliva; his voice seemed to rumble in the depths of some cavern.

‘What’s that over yonder on the ground?’

At the foot of the wall in the street below a carter was bending over something. The spectators kept silent and motionless lest they should lose the answer. They could distinguish nothing on the pavement but a layer of black mud.

‘A little blood,’ answered the carter, without altering his position. And with the point of a stick he continued to search for something in the mud.

‘What else?’ asked the man with the pipe.

The carter stood up, holding something on the end of his stick, the nature of which could not be determined from above.

‘Hair!’

‘What colour?’

‘Fair.’

The voices echoed weirdly in the kind of well formed by the high walls.

‘Let us go, Giorgio,’ entreated Ippolita.

A little pale and upset, she shook her lover by the arm as he leaned over the parapet, fascinated by the horrid details of the scene.

They turned away from the tragic spot in silence, both absorbed in the melancholy reflections called up by such a death, their depression visible in their faces.

'Happy are the dead!' ejaculated Giorgio presently; 'they have no more cause for doubt!'

'That is true!'

Their voices were faint with unutterable sadness.

She hung her head, and added with some bitterness, not untinged with regret—

'Poor love!'

'What love?' asked Giorgio, still pursuing his own train of thought.

'Ours.'

'Then you feel it nearing its end?'

'Not mine.'

'Mine then, you mean?'

A feeling of hardly repressed irritation gave a point of sharpness to his voice as he repeated, fixing his eyes upon her—

'You mean mine, then—speak.'

But she was silent, only letting her head droop lower.

'You will not answer because you know very well that you would not be telling the truth.'

There was a pause, while each felt an overwhelming desire to read the heart of the other.

'That is how love's agony begins,' he went on. 'You are not conscious of it yet—but I am. Ever since you came back I have watched you incessantly, and every day I discover a fresh sign.'

'What sign?'

'A very hateful sign, Ippolita. Oh, what a terrible thing it is to love, and yet to possess a clearness of insight which never falters for a moment!'

She shook her head with a little mutinous gesture, and her face clouded. Once again, as had happened so often before, a feeling of hostility had sprung up between the lovers. Each was wounded by the injustice of the doubt, and rebelled against it inwardly with a dull and brooding anger which would occasionally find vent in hard, irreparable words, serious aspersions, or absurd recriminations. An invincible

frenzy would assail them to torture one another, to rend and lacerate each other's heart.

Ippolita turned moody and silent, with frowning brows and tight closed lips, while Giorgio continued to look at her with an exasperating smile.

'Yes, that is how it begins,' he repeated, still keeping up that acrid smile and penetrating gaze. 'In the depths of your soul you are conscious of a vague unrest—a kind of impatience which you cannot repress. When you are with me, you feel a sort of instinctive repugnance to me, and you have not the power to overcome it. Then you become taciturn; you are obliged to make an herculean effort in order to address a remark to me; you misconstrue everything I say, and involuntarily your voice hardens even in the most trivial answer.'

She did not interrupt him even by a movement. Stung by her silence he resumed his argument, spurred on to it not only by the vicious desire to hurt his companion, but by a purely impersonal taste for investigation which had been cultivated and rendered more acute by diligent reading. He sought to express his ideas with the certainty and precision which he had learned from the pages of the analysts; but just as in his self-communings the point of inner consciousness which he wished to demonstrate was exaggerated and distorted by the set formulas into which he moulded his expression, so in his conversations the straining after perspicacity often tended to obscure the sincerity of his sentiments and led him into error as to the private motives he professed to discover in other people's actions. Encumbered by a mass of psychological observations—partly his own, partly gathered from books—his brain finally confused and confounded everything both in himself and others, and his mind assumed irretrievably artificial attitudes.

'Do not suppose,' he went on, 'that I am reproaching you. It is not in the least your fault. Each human heart is furnished with only a given amount of sensitive force to expend in erotic emotion. In the course of time this force

must inevitably be consumed like anything else. Once exhausted, no power on earth can prevent love dying. And, after all, you have loved me for a long time—nearly two years! Our second anniversary falls on the 2nd of April. Did you remember?’

She nodded.

‘Two years,’ he repeated musingly.

They strolled towards a bench, on to which Ippolita sank, looking haggard and fatigued. The heavy black carriage of a priest rumbled through the avenue, grinding the sand shrilly beneath its wheels; the sound of a cornet came up faintly from the Flaminian Way; then silence resumed possession of the wooded paths. A few drops of rain fell at intervals.

‘Our second anniversary will be decidedly lugubrious,’ continued Giorgio implacably; ‘and yet we are bound to celebrate it—I have a decided weakness for bitter things.’

Ippolita betrayed the pain she was enduring in a mournful smile, then turning towards him with unexpected gentleness: ‘Why do you say all these unkind things?’ she asked, with a long look deep into his eyes.

Once again each felt an overwhelming desire to read the other’s heart. She was fully aware of the tragic nature of the malady which weighed upon her lover; she well knew the hidden cause of all this acrimony.

‘What is it?’ she asked, encouraging him to speak, to relieve his overcharged heart. ‘What ails you? Tell me.’

The unlooked-for kindness of her tone and manner threw him into confusion. He saw that she understood him and pitied him, and a deep sense of self-commiseration welled up in his heart. A profound emotion shook his whole being.

‘What ails me?’ he returned. ‘Love!’

All the aggressiveness had gone out of his voice. In thus uncovering his irremediable wound, he was overwhelmed with pity for himself. The vague resentment against the woman at his side, which rankled in his breast, had melted away. He recognised the injustice of that resentment, because he recognised the overruling power of a chain of fatal necessities.

His misery was not caused by any human agency—it was the outcome of the very essence of life itself; not against the loved one, but against love itself should he bear a grudge. Love—toward which by nature his whole being was irresistibly drawn—love was of all the sad things of this earth the very saddest. And he was condemned to bear the burden of this supreme sorrow perhaps even unto death!

As he did not speak, and seemed lost in thought, Ippolita began again: ‘So you think I do not love you, Giorgio?’

‘Well—no—I think you do love me,’ he replied; ‘but can you give me any proof that to-morrow—in a month—a year—you will be equally content to belong to me? Can you even prove to me that to-day—at this moment—you are mine, wholly? How much of you can I call my own?’

‘All.’

‘Nothing—or next to nothing. I do not possess that which I want—you are practically an unknown person to me. Like every other human being, you carry a whole world in you, into which I cannot enter, and no amount of passion will open the gates for me. Of your feelings, your sentiments, your thoughts I know only the very smallest part. Words are an imperfect vehicle of expression. The soul is incommunicable—you cannot give me your soul. Even in our supremest raptures we are and remain apart—solitary. I kiss you on the brow, and behind that brow there lies a thought which possibly is not for me. I speak to you, and who knows but what some chance phrase of mine may not awaken in you a memory of some other hour in which my love had no place or part. A man passes and looks at you—that stirs in your heart a something which I may not catch. And I can never know when some recollection of your past may not illumine the present moment. Oh, that past life of yours!—it fills me with absolute terror. I may be beside you, I feel my whole being permeated with the rapture which comes to me at certain moments from your mere presence, I caress you, I talk to you, listen to you, abandon myself utterly to your charm. Suddenly a thought will strike me cold: what if

I, all unwittingly, should have evoked in her memory the ghost of some sensation felt once before, some pale phantom of the days long past? Never could I describe to you what I suffer. The glow which gave me an illusory feeling of community of soul between us is suddenly extinguished. You become remote, inaccessible; I am left alone in horrible solitude. Ten, twenty months of intimacy are as if they had never been—you are as much of a stranger as in the days before you loved me. And as I cease to caress you, I become silent and undemonstrative, fearful lest by a mere touch I should stir the hidden sediment accumulated by the irrevocable past in the depths of your soul. And then one of those agonising spells of silence falls upon us, during which we eat out our hearts in idle misery. I ask, What are you thinking of? and you reply, What are you thinking of? I know nothing of your thoughts nor you of mine. From moment to moment the gulf widens between us, a gulf into which it is such anguish to look that by a sort of cowardly impulse I turn from it and clasp you all the closer to my heart. The rapture of possessing you is as great as ever, but what rapture can compensate us for the profound sadness which inevitably follows upon it?’

‘I cannot say that I feel like that,’ returned Ippolita; ‘I give myself up more entirely. Perhaps I love you better than you me.’

The tinge of superiority in her words vexed his morbidly sensitive spirit afresh.

‘You think too much,’ she continued. ‘You pick your thoughts to pieces. I daresay you find them more attractive than me, because your thoughts are always new, always changing, whereas I have lost all novelty for you. In the first days of our love you were less introspective, more spontaneous. You had not acquired a taste for bitter things then, because you were more lavish with your kisses than your words. If, as you say, words are such an inadequate form of expression, why make so much use of it—you often use it cruelly.’

Then, after an interval of silence, led away in her turn by the temptation of enunciating a high-sounding phrase, she added: 'Dissection presupposes a corpse.'

She had hardly uttered the words when she repented them—it sounded vulgar, unwomanly, flippant. She heartily regretted not having preserved that tone of gentleness and indulgence which had softened Giorgio just before. Thus once again she had broken her resolve to be the most patient and tender of nurses to her friend.

'You see now how you spoil me,' she said, in a sincerely penitent voice.

He smiled faintly. They both were well aware that in this alteration their love had been the chief sufferer.

The priest's carriage passed again, its two long-tailed black horses trotting sedately. The trees looked spectral in the foggy atmosphere of the dying day. Leaden, violet-tinted clouds smoked upon the Palatino and the Vatican. A ray of light, yellow as sulphur and straight as a sword, struck the Monte Mario behind the sharp points of the cypresses.

'Does she love me still?' mused Giorgio. 'Why is she so irritable? Does she feel, perhaps, that what I say is true, or will be very soon? Irritability is a sure symptom. But am I not conscious of the same feeling gnawing continuously at my heart? I know its real cause in myself. I am jealous. Of what? Of everything—of the passing objects reflected in her eyes.' He looked at her. 'She is very pale. I wish she always looked ill and low-spirited. When she regains her colour I feel as if it were some one else. When she laughs I cannot restrain a vague sense of hostility, almost of anger, against her—not always, however.'

His thoughts wandered to the falling shades of evening, and he noted absently a certain intimate correspondence between the looks of the woman beside him and the aspect of the evening which pleased him. Faint violet tints gleamed through the soft dusky pallor of her skin, and a narrow ribbon of an exquisite shade of yellow which she wore round her neck revealed two little brown beauty-spots just above its

edge. 'She is very beautiful; there is almost always a look of depth, of meaning, of passion, on her face. There lies the secret of her charm. Her beauty never palls upon me, it for ever suggests to me some vision. But wherein does her beauty consist? I should be at a loss to say. Strictly speaking, she is not beautiful at all. Sometimes, in looking at her, I have been painfully surprised and disillusioned. Then it is that I see her features in the crude light of physical truth, without the transfiguring glow of thought to spiritualise them. Nevertheless, she has three divine points of beauty: her brow, her eyes, and her mouth—divine!'

The thought of her laughter recurred to him.

'What was she telling me yesterday? Something about her sister—I cannot remember what—some amusing little incident that happened in her sister's house in Milan while she was there. "How we laughed!" So she can laugh when she is far away from me—she can be amused! And yet I have her letters, and every one of them is full of grief and tears and despairing regrets.'

He felt as if he had been stabbed, a strange unrest swept over him, as though he were suddenly brought face to face with some serious and irreparable but, as yet, not clearly defined fact. He was experiencing the usual phenomena of sentiment exaggerated through the medium of associated ideas. That innocent burst of laughter was thus transformed into incessant hilarity every day, every hour, during the entire period of her absence. Ippolita must have passed her days cheerfully and lightly, meeting commonplace people of whom he knew nothing, surrounded by the friends of her brother-in-law, by admirers, and every variety of uninteresting persons. And her wistful letters were all lies. He recalled one passage word for word: 'Life here is insupportable. We are simply besieged by our friends. They will not give us one hour's peace—you know how hospitable the Milanese are. . . .' And he instantly had a picture of Ippolita surrounded by a crowd of middle-class business men, dispensing smiles, giving her hand to everybody, listening to their inane

conversation, making insipid answers, adapting herself to the prevailing vulgarity.

At that moment the whole weight of that suffering descended upon his heart which he had endured for two long years at the thought of the life his mistress led in that, to him, unknown world, where she spent the hours she could not devote to him. 'What is she doing? Whom does she see? To whom is she speaking? How does she act towards those persons whose life she shares?' Eternal questions, eternally unanswered.

'Each one of these people takes something from her,' he continued, in his self-torture, 'and therefore something of mine. I shall never know how much these people may have influenced her, what emotions and thoughts they may have aroused in her. Ippolita's beauty is full of seduction, just that kind of beauty that lashes a man's desire. Many a one amongst that odious crowd must have desired her. A man's desire is visible in his eyes; looks are free, and a woman is defenceless against the desire of a man's eyes. What, I wonder, are the impressions of a woman when she is conscious of exciting that desire? She certainly cannot remain impervious to it—it must create some impression, arouse some emotion, if only that of repugnance or dislike. Thus any man, no matter who, has the power to excite the woman who loves me. Wherein, then, does my special proprietorship lie?'

He suffered intensely, the more so that he illustrated his arguments to himself by physical images. 'I love Ippolita—love her with a passion which I should judge to be inextinguishable, did I not know that all human love must have an end. I love her, and cannot conceive of any higher rapture than that which she affords me. And yet, more than once, the sight of some passing woman has pierced me with a sudden desire. More than once the fugitive glance of a pair of eyes has left an indefinable mark upon my soul. More than once my thoughts have lingered round some woman who passed me, or some one I have met in a drawing-room—even the mistress of one of my friends. How would she love? I have

wondered—What is the secret of her fascination? And for a considerable time the recollection of her has haunted me, not to the point of obsession, but with a certain slow insistence, at intervals, at times even while I have held Ippolita in my arms. That being so, why then should not she too have been surprised into some sudden desire for a passing stranger? If I had the power to look into her soul, and saw it traversed by one such flash of desire, be it never so slight, I should undoubtedly consider her sullied with an indelible stain, and should be ready to die of grief. But I can never have that material proof, her soul being invisible and impalpable, though none the less liable to violation; indeed, far more so than her body. The analogy, however, is sufficiently enlightening, the possibility is certain. For all I know, she may at this moment be contemplating some such recent stain upon her conscience, and see it widen as she gazes.'

He winced and started at the thought as if he had been struck.

'What is it? What are you thinking of?' asked Ippolita tenderly.

'Of you,' he replied.

'Kindly or unkindly?'

'Unkindly.'

She sighed: then, 'Shall we be moving?' she asked.

'Yes, let us go.'

They rose and returned along the path they had come by.

'Dear love,' said Ippolita softly, with tears in her voice, 'what a dreary evening!'

She stopped short and looked about her, as if to drink in the last sad remnants of the dying day.

All about them the Pincio was silent and deserted, full of violet shadows through which the statues gleamed white like tombstones. Below them lay the city under a pall of smoke. A few drops of rain fell at long intervals.

'Where shall you go this evening? What are you going to do?' she asked.

'I have not the least idea,' he answered forlornly.

Each of them suffered in their own way as they stood side by side, but they thought with terror of the sharper pangs that awaited them: the horrible torture inflicted on their defenceless souls by their morbidly acute imagination in the watches of the night.

'I will stay with you, if you like,' suggested Ippolita shyly.

Her lover, filled with a sense of sullen rancour, and egged on by a frenzied desire to be cruel, to revenge himself, answered, 'No.'

And yet his heart protested—You will not be able to stay away from her—you know it, you cannot. And in the midst of all this blind hostility, the clear consciousness of that absolute impossibility gave him a sort of internal tremor, a strange tremor of exultant pride at the presence of the overwhelming passion which possessed him. In his heart he repeated—No, I could not do without her to-night—*I could not!* He had a vague sense of being dominated by some force outside himself. A tragic wave swept over him.

'Giorgio!' cried Ippolita, clasping his arms timorously.

He shuddered as he recognised the spot where they had stopped to look down at the stain of blood left by the suicide.

'Are you frightened?' he asked.

'A little,' she replied, still clinging to his arm. He disengaged himself, and going to the parapet, leaned over. The street was dark already, but he fancied he could distinguish the stain upon the pavement, because the sight was still fresh in his memory. The weird suggestiveness of the twilight created before his mind's-eye a vague presentment of the dead—the shadowy outline of a young man with blood on his fair curls. Who was he? Why did he kill himself? He identified himself with that bloodless shade. Thoughts, rapid, incoherent, flitted through his brain. He saw, as in a flash of lightning, his poor uncle Demetrio, his father's younger brother; he too had committed suicide. A face on the white pillow veiled in black; a hand pallid and slender, yet replete

with virile strength; on the wall, a little silver holy-water dish, hanging by three chains, tinkling faintly as it swayed to and fro in the draught of air. 'Supposing I were to throw myself over? One leap, and then a rapid fall. Does one lose consciousness, I wonder, in falling through space?' He heard in imagination the thud of the body on the stones below, and he shuddered. A fierce, agonising repulsion shook him from head to foot—a repulsion mingled with a strange joy. He pictured to himself the tender pleasures of the coming night. Images and thoughts succeeded one another with wonderful rapidity.

Turning round he found Ippolita gazing at him with wide dilated eyes, and he thought he read their expression. He went over to her and slipped his arm through hers with a little gesture that was familiar to her, while she pressed his arm close against her heart.

'Closing time! closing time!' The cry of the gatekeepers rang through the silence under the trees.

'Closing time!'

The cry made the succeeding silence more lugubrious; and those two words, hurled at them from the throats of men who were invisible to them, affected the lovers like a physical blow. They hastened their steps to show that they had heard the warning cry. But here and there, among the deserted paths, the voices persisted in repeating it—

'Closing time!'

'Maledizione!' exclaimed Ippolita, with a quick gesture of exasperation, and she walked faster.

The bell of the Trinita de' Monti was ringing the Angelus. Rome appeared like a huge grey cloud, a shapeless bulk spread out over the ground. Here and there in the houses near by, a window gleamed red through the evening mists.

'Then you will come?' asked Giorgio.

'Yes, yes, I will.'

'Soon?'

'About eleven.'

'If you fail me I shall die.'

'I will come.'

They looked deep into each other's eyes where each read an intoxicating promise.

'And you forgive me?' he asked fondly. Their eyes met once more.

'Adorata!' he murmured.

'Addio!' she answered. 'Think of me till I return—Addio!'

At the bottom of the Via Gregoriana they parted, Ippolita turning down the Via Di Capo le Case. He followed her with his eyes as she walked along the wet pavement, which glittered in the light of the street lamps. 'There—she has left me once more, and returns to a home about which I am ignorant, and divests herself of the ideality in which I clothe her as in a garment. She becomes another woman altogether; a woman like a thousand others. I know nothing of her from this moment. The vulgar necessities of life take hold on her, absorb and drag her down to the common level.'

The fragrance of violets streamed out in his face from a florist's shop, and made his heart throb with conflicting emotions.

'Oh, why can we never make our lives correspond to our dreams—why cannot we live for ourselves alone?'

II

ABOUT ten o'clock the next morning, while Giorgio was still plunged in the deep restorative sleep of youth, his servant came to wake him.

'I will not see anybody,' he cried, turning round in bed, thoroughly put out. 'Leave me alone.'

But he could hear the voice of his importunate visitor calling from the next room—

'Sorry to insist, Giorgio, but I really must speak to you.'

He recognised the voice of Alfonso Exili, which served to increase his ill-humour.

Exili was an old college friend of his, a young man of mediocre intelligence, ruined by a life of gambling and debauchery, and now reduced to a kind of adventurer, living on what he could pick up from his friends. He retained all the appearance of gilded youth, in spite of the ravages vice had made in his face; but there was in his whole person and his manner that indescribable air of low cunning inseparable from people who are forced to live by ignoble and humiliating expedients.

He entered the room as soon as the servant left, and assuming a dejected air said, swallowing half his words, 'Forgive me, Giorgio, if I throw myself upon your kindness once more. There is a debt of honour I must pay. Will you help me? A mere trifle—only three hundred lire—so sorry.'

'Indeed, so you pay your gambling debts, do you? Well, you surprise me.' Giorgio flung this insult at him with perfect coolness. Not having succeeded in breaking off all connection with this *mauvais sujet*, he was obliged to have recourse to opprobrium as one would use a stick to ward off some noisome animal.

Exili smiled.

'Now then, don't be hard on me,' he whimpered like a woman. 'You will let me have the money, won't you? Only three hundred lire. On my word of honour you shall have it back to-morrow.'

Giorgio burst out laughing. He then rang the bell for his servant.

'Look for the bunch of small keys,' he said, when the man came, 'there—in my clothes, on the sofa.'

The man found them.

'Open the second drawer over there, and give me the big pocket-book. Now, you may go.'

When the servant had gone, Exili asked, with a timorous, strained smile, 'Couldn't you make it four hundred?'

'No! There, take it—it is the last you will get from me. Now go!' and he laid the money on the bed instead of handing it to him. Exili smiled once more, gathered it up and

put it in his pocket; after which he remarked in an ambiguous tone, half fulsome, half ironical, 'You have a noble heart!'

He looked about him—'And a charming bedroom into the bargain.'

He proceeded to establish himself on a sofa, poured out a glass of liqueur, and replenished his cigar-case.

'By the way, who is your present mistress? Not the same one as last year, I think, eh?'

'Get out, Exili, I want to go to sleep!'

'What a superb creature she was, too! The finest eyes in all Rome. Is she here still? I have not come across her for some time. She must be away. She has a sister in Milan, I fancy.'

He poured himself out another glass and drank it at a gulp. Possibly he was only talking in order to gain time to empty the flask.

'Separated from her husband, isn't she? I expect her financial affairs are not very flourishing. However, she always dresses well. I met her about two months ago in the Via Babuino. Do you know your probable successor? It is Monti. No, you would not be likely to know him—a *mercante di campagna*, a big, stout fellow with washed-out fair hair. The day I speak of, in the Via Babuino, he was following her. You know one sees it at a glance when a man is after a woman. And Monti has lots of money, too.' The last remark was made in an indefinable tone: partly envious, partly rapacious, wholly odious. He drank a third glass noiselessly.

'Giorgio, are you asleep?'

No answer. He feigned sleep, though, of course, he had not lost one word, but he was afraid that Exili would hear the beating of his heart through the bed-clothes.

'Giorgio.'

He pretended to wake with a start from a doze.

'What! are you there still? Have you not gone yet?'

'I am just going,' returned Exili, approaching the bed. 'Why, look here, here's a tortoiseshell hairpin!'

He bent down and picked it up off the carpet, examined it carefully, and then placed it on the counterpane.

'Happy man!' he remarked, in his former tone of irony and adulation. 'Well—*a riveder ci!* and many thanks.'

He held out his hand, but Giorgio kept his firmly beneath the bed-clothes. The babbler turned towards the door.

'Your cognac is really exquisite; I will just take one more glass.'

He drank it and departed, leaving Giorgio to enjoy the venom at his leisure.

III

THE second 'anniversary' fell upon the 2nd of April.

'This time we ought to celebrate it away from Rome,' said Ippolita. 'We ought to give up one long week to love—by ourselves—never mind where, as long as it is not here.'

'Do you remember the first anniversary, last year?' asked Giorgio.

'Yes, I remember.'

'It was at Easter—Easter Sunday.'

'I came to you in the morning, at ten o'clock.'

'You had on the little English jacket I always liked so much; you had your prayer-book with you.'

'I did not go to mass that particular morning.'

'You were in such a hurry.'

'I had almost run away from home. You know I never have a moment to myself on fête days. And for all that, I managed to stay with you till midday. We had people to lunch that day.'

'And after that, we never saw each other the whole day. It was a sad enough anniversary.'

'That is true.'

'And what sunshine there was!'

'And the mass of flowers in your room!'

'I too had gone out early; I bought up the whole Piazza di Spania.'

‘You threw handfuls of rose-leaves at me—you put some of them down my neck and up my sleeves; do you remember?’

‘I remember.’

‘Afterwards, when I got home and took my things off, I found them all.’ She smiled. ‘I did not go out again that day—I did not want to—I went over it all again in thought. Yes, it was a sad anniversary.’

There was an interval of pensive silence.

‘Did you think in your heart of hearts that we should still be together on the second one?’

‘I?—No.’

‘Nor I either.’

‘That is the kind of love,’ mused Giorgio, ‘which carries in itself the presentiment of its end.’ He thought of her husband, but without resentment, rather with a sort of kindly compassion. ‘She is free now, why should I be more uneasy than formerly? I looked upon her husband, I suppose, as a sort of guarantee—as a guardian to shield my love from all danger. I may be wrong—I know I suffered greatly, even then. But pain that is past never seems so bad as the present.’ Absorbed in his own train of thought, he did not hear what Ippolita was saying.

‘Well, where shall we go to?’ she asked. ‘We must make up our minds. To-morrow is the first. I have already prepared my mother for it, by telling her that I am leaving home for a short time, one of these days. You may trust me, I can easily invent some plausible excuse.’

Her voice was gay, and she smiled as she spoke. But that smile which flashed out at her last words seemed to him the outward and visible sign of an instinctive feminine satisfaction in the arrangement of any piece of deception. The ease with which Ippolita schemed to hoodwink her mother was displeasing to him. He looked back with a sense of regret to the days of her husband’s vigilance. ‘Yet why resent her liberty so painfully, seeing that it helps to minister to my pleasure? I would give the world to rid myself of these fixed

ideas, these suspicions which are an insult to her. I love her, and yet I insult her. I love her, and yet I believe her to be capable of a base action.'

'Still, we must not go too far away,' she was saying. 'Don't you know of some quiet, solitary, leafy spot a little off the common track? Tivoli?—No. Frascati?—No.'

'Take the Baedeker over there on the table and look.'

'We will look together.'

Accordingly she fetched the red book, knelt beside the armchair in which he was seated, and began turning over the pages with the pretty grace of a child, from time to time reading a line or two under her breath.

He watched, fascinated by the delicate outline of the nape of her neck, from whence the glossy dark hair swept up to the crown of her head, where it was twisted into a kind of coronet. He looked at the twin beauty-spots nestling side by side on the velvety pallor of her skin, of which they served to heighten the charm. He noticed that she wore no earrings. For three or four days she had not worn her sapphire buttons. 'Has she been obliged to sacrifice them for some pressing domestic necessity? It is quite possible that she may have to endure material hardships in her daily life at home.' He forced himself to look the thought in the face and follow it to the bitter end. 'When she is tired of me (and that will be ere long) she will fall into the hands of the first person who will offer her an easy existence—who, in return for what she can give, will be ready to secure her against want. It might very well be the man of whom Exili spoke. Her dislike of sordid cares will overrule that other repugnance. She will adapt herself; perhaps even there may be no struggle at all, because the descent will be gradual.'

And he called to mind the mistress of one of his friends, a Contessa Albertini, who, separated from her husband and left without means of subsistence, had descended by progressive stages to lucrative amours, though she was sufficiently adroit to keep up appearances. Another instance occurred to him which gave still further colour to the possibility which he

feared—a possibility which, as it rose up before him out of the dim future, wrung his heart with ineffable anguish.

He could not hope for respite from his fears; sooner or later he was doomed to witness the degradation of the woman he had raised so high. Life is full of such failures.

Meanwhile, she was lamenting: 'I cannot find anything here—Gubbio, Viterbo, Orvieto. Here is the plan of Orvieto—Monastery of San Pietro, Monastery of San Paolo, Monastery del Jesu, Monastery of San Bernardino, Monastery of San Ludovico, Convent of San Domenico, Convent of San Francesco, Convent of the Servi di Maria.'

She read in a sing-song voice, as if intoning a litany; then, all at once, began to laugh, and, throwing back her head, offered her fair brow to her lover's lips. She was in one of her expansive, debonnaire moods, which made her look like a little girl.

'Did you ever see such a quantity of monasteries and convents? It must be a very queer place. Shall we go to Orvieto?'

Her gaiety reacted on him like a douche of fresh water, and he abandoned himself to it with a sense of gratitude and comfort. As he pressed his lips to Ippolita's forehead, he called to mind the ancient and deserted Guelph city; wholly absorbed in the mute adoration of its wonderful Duomo.

'Orvieto? Were you never there? Imagine a rock in the middle of a melancholy valley, and on the top of the rock a city, so deathly silent as to give the impression of being uninhabited—every window closed—grass growing in the dusty grey streets—a Capuchin friar crosses a piazza—a priest descends from a closed carriage in front of an hospital, all in black, and with a decrepit old servant to open the door; here a tower against the white, rain-sodden clouds—there a clock, slowly striking the hour, and suddenly at the end of a street a miracle—the Duomo!'

'What utter peace!' murmured Ippolita dreamily, as if she had a vision of the silent city before her eyes.

'I saw it first one February; the weather was fitful and

uncertain, like to-day—a little rain, and then a little sunshine. I stayed one whole day, and left with regret, carrying away with me an ever-recurring longing for its peace and silence. Oh, what peace! I had only myself for company, and I thought wistfully: Oh, to have a mistress, or rather a devoted sister-lover, to come here and remain for a whole month, the month of April—an April of rain and sudden bursts of sunshine, full of soft, moist warmth; to spend much time in and about the cathedral, to go and gather roses in the convent gardens, and pillage the monasteries of their *confetture*, drink the *Est Est Est* out of little antique Etruscan goblets, and sink into a downy bed all hung with virgin white!

Ippolita smiled enraptured at the picture, then with a little naïve air she said, 'I am very pious; please take me to Orvieto!'

Curled up at her lover's feet, she clasped his hands in hers. A feeling of intense happiness permeated her whole being, giving her a foretaste of peace, of languorous idleness tinged with melancholy.

'Tell me more about it.'

He kissed her on the brow—a long kiss full of pure emotion—and he let his eyes rest long upon her. 'Your brow is so beautiful,' he said at last, with a slight tremor.

In this moment, the real Ippolita corresponded with the ideal woman he carried in his heart. He saw her fond and docile, shedding around her an atmosphere of high-souled poetry. Like the title he had bestowed upon her, she was grave and sweet—*gravis dum suavis*.

'Talk to me,' she murmured.

A chastened light came from the balcony. From time to time the windows rattled faintly, while the rain pattered against the glass.

IV

'You see we have already, in imagination, enjoyed the best part of our pleasure and tasted the delicate essence of

our sensations ; I think we ought to give up the idea of translating it into reality. We will not go to Orvieto'—and he chose another place—Albano-Laziale.

Giorgio did not know Albano nor Arricia nor the Lake of Nemi. As a child, Ippolita had been to Albano to visit an aunt, since dead. That place, therefore, would have the charm of novelty for him, and for Ippolita it would recall memories of long ago. 'Does not a fresh scene of beauty seem to renew and purify one's love? The memories of unsullied childhood leave a perfume, a freshness in the heart that never loses its beneficent power.'

They decided to leave on the 2nd of April by the midday train. When they met in the middle of the crowd at the station, they were both conscious of a sort of anxious joy at the bottom of their hearts.

'Shall we not be noticed? Tell me—shall we not be noticed?' asked Ippolita, half-laughing, half-frightened, feeling as if every eye were upon her. 'How long is it till we start? Dio mio! how nervous I feel!'

They had hoped to have a compartment to themselves, but to their great annoyance they were obliged to resign themselves to the company of three fellow-travellers. Giorgio bowed to a lady and gentleman.

'Who are they?' asked Ippolita in a whisper.

'I will tell you presently.'

She eyed the couple curiously. The gentleman was old, with a long and venerable beard and an enormous, yellowish bald head, in the middle of which was a deep depression like the imprint of a large finger in some soft substance. The lady, who was wrapped in an Indian shawl, wore a species of shade to her bonnet, from under which a thin and meditative face peered forth ; and her dress and appearance generally recalled the caricatures of the English bluestocking. The old man's eyes, though watery, were singularly vivacious ; they seemed to be illumined with inward light like those of an ecstatic. He returned Giorgio Aurispa's bow with a smile of great sweetness,

Ippolita searched her memory in vain. Where had she seen that couple before? Somewhere, she was quite sure; she had a confused feeling that this strange pair formed a part of some episode in the history of her love.

'Who are they? Do tell me,' she whispered again in her friend's ear.

'The Martlets: Mr. Martlet and his wife. They will bring us luck. Do you remember where we met them?'

'No, but I am sure I have seen them somewhere.'

'It was in the chapel in the Via Belsiano on the 2nd of April—the day I first saw you.'

'Ah yes, now I remember!'

Her eyes beamed; the coincidence seemed a very miracle to her. She looked at the old couple again almost affectionately.

'What a happy omen!' A delicious melancholy took possession of her. She leaned her head against the cushions, and let her thoughts go back to the past. She saw the little chapel in the Via Belsiano, drowned in a blue, mysterious twilight—on the platform, which was curved like a balcony, a chorus of young girls—down below, a few musicians with stringed instruments standing at white deal music-stands, and all around in the oaken stalls the sparse audience, nearly all of them white-haired or bald. The conductor beat time; a pious odour of departed incense and violets mingled with the music of Sebastian Bach.

Overcome by the poignant sweetness of the recollection, she leaned towards her friend, and murmured: 'Are you remembering too?'

She would have liked to communicate her emotion to him—show him that she had forgotten nothing—not the most minute detail of that solemn occasion.

He furtively sought her hand under the wide folds of her travelling-cloak, and held it fast in his. Each was conscious of a tremor of the soul which recalled to them certain delicate emotions of the first days of their love. They remained thus for a while, lost in thought, a little ecstatic, lulled by the

moist, warm atmosphere and the regular and continuous motion of the train, catching glimpses through the mist of a pale green landscape. It had clouded over and was raining. Mr. Martlet was dozing in his corner, Mrs. Martlet was deep in a review, *The Lyceum*, and the third passenger was sleeping profoundly with his cap pulled down over his eyes.

Giorgio gave himself up to the enjoyment of his recollections. 'Mr. Martlet beat time vehemently with the conductor whenever the chorus happened to fall out of time. At certain passages all the old men beat time, as if carried away simultaneously by the spirit of the music. The air was full of the fragrance of incense and of violets. Could I have imagined a stranger or more poetic prelude to my love? It might almost be a passage out of some forgotten romance instead of an actual episode of my own life. I can see it all clearly still, down to the most insignificant detail. The poetry of that first scene has spread a dream-like shadow over my whole love.' Half-lulled to slumber, certain vague images took hold upon his mind with a sort of musical insistence,—a few grains of incense—a bouquet of violets.

'Do look at Mr. Martlet,' said Ippolita softly, 'he is sleeping as calmly as an infant. You have had a little nap, too, have you not?' she added, with a smile. 'It is still raining. I feel so dreadfully exhausted I can hardly keep my eyes open'; and she looked at him with half-closed eyes through her long lashes.

'Her eyelashes took my fancy from the very first,' mused Giorgio. 'She was sitting in the middle of the chapel on a chair with a high back. Her profile was outlined against the light of the rain-washed window. As the clouds passed over, the windows brightened suddenly. She moved slightly, and as she did so, I had a full view of her eyelashes—they were prodigiously long.'

'Will it be very long before we arrive?' asked Ippolita.

The whistle of the train announced their approach to a station. 'I am certain we have come further than we ought,' she went on.

'Oh no!'

'You had better find out.'

'Segni-Paliano!' cried a hoarse voice along the carriages.

Giorgio put his head out. 'Albano?' he asked.

'No, signore—Segni-Paliano,' returned the man, with a smile.

'Are you going to Albano? Then you ought to have changed at Cecchina.'

Ippolita burst into such a fit of laughter, that the Martlets gazed at her in astonishment, and Giorgio caught the infection of her mirth.

'What is to be done now?'

'Well, first of all, we had better get out.'

Giorgio handed over the luggage to the porter; Ippolita, still delighted at the little contretemps, keeping up her gay ripple of laughter. Mr. Martlet received the full force of this wave of youth and light-heartedness, which affected him like a burst of sunshine, and he bowed and smiled benignantly at Ippolita, who left the carriage with a vague sense of regret.

'Poor Mr. Martlet,' she said, in a tone between laughter and tears, as she watched the train wending its way through the desolate country. 'I am quite sorry to part from him. Who knows if I shall ever see him again?' Then, turning to Giorgio, 'And now, what next?'

The stationmaster informed them that there was a train for La Cecchina at half-past four.

'That is not so bad,' said Ippolita; 'it is now half-past two. Now, I beg to announce that from this moment onwards I become the high directing power of this expedition. You must follow me. Keep quite close to me, little Giorgio—mind you don't lose yourself!'

She spoke as if he were a baby, and both enjoyed it immensely.

'But where is Segni? Where is Paliano?'

There was no sign of a village anywhere near; a low line of bare hills stretched along beneath the dull grey sky. Close by, a solitary little tree, frail and twisted, waved to and fro in the moist breeze.

As it was still raining, the wanderers took refuge in the little station waiting-room, where there was a small fireplace, but no fire. On one wall hung a tattered old map, furrowed with pencil-marks; on another, a square of card-board proclaimed the virtues of some elixir. In front of the fireplace, which had lost even the recollection of a fire, stood a sofa gasping out its horse-hair soul through a dozen rents in its black wax-cloth cover.

'Oh, look!' cried Ippolita, reading in the Baedeker; 'at Segni there is a hotel, the Locanda di Gaetano!'

This high-sounding title gave fresh occasion for laughter.

'Suppose we smoke a cigarette?' said Giorgio. 'It is three o'clock. At this hour, two years ago, I was just entering the chapel.'

And once again the memory of that great day absorbed their thoughts. They smoked for some minutes in silence, listening to the rain, which was coming down heavily now. Through the misty window-panes they could see the poor little tree writhing in the blast.

'My love dates from further back than yours,' Giorgio began. 'It had already sprung into life before that day.'

She protested.

'I can see you now, as you passed me that first day,' he went on gently, fascinated by the all-powerful charm of the days that have fled and will return no more. 'It made an ineffaceable impression on me. It was towards evening, when they begin to light the lamps, and the streets were flooded with luminous blue; I was alone, standing in front of Alinari's window. I was looking at the pictures, but hardly saw them—in an indefinable state of mind—something of weariness, much of depression, and a certain vague yearning after the ideal dominating the whole. That evening I felt a divine thirst for the poetic, for the higher life, for all things delicate and spiritual. Was it a presentiment?'

There was a long pause. Ippolita did not speak, waiting for him to continue, tasting the exquisite pleasure of listening to his voice through the faint smoke of the cigarettes, which

seemed to draw another veil between her and the already veiled past.

‘It was in February. Mark this—I had just come from Orvieto; in fact, I think I only went to Alinari’s to try and get a photograph of the reliquary. And you came past! Twice or three times, but only twice or three times, I have seen you as pale as you were then—with that particular pallor. You have no idea how pale you were, Ippolita. I have never been able to find the right simile for it. I thought to myself: How can that woman possibly keep upon her feet? She cannot have one drop of blood in her veins. It was a quite supernatural pallor, and in that shadowy blue light it gave you the appearance of some incorporeal being. I took no notice of your escort. I had no wish to follow you, and you never glanced in my direction. One other detail I remember: a few steps further on, you stopped because a lamplighter was in your way. Well, I can still see the little point of flame up in the lamp, and how it suddenly spread and lit up your face.’

Ippolita smiled a little wistfully, with that sadness which grips a woman’s heart when she sees a picture of herself as she used to be.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I was very pale. I had only left my bed a week or so before, after an illness of three months. I had been face to face with death.’

A sudden burst of rain dashed against the window, the little tree outside writhed with an almost circular movement, as if under an uprooting hand. For some minutes the lovers watched this fury and agitation which, in the midst of the desolation, the ugliness, the supine inertia of the surrounding landscape, assumed a weird aspect of sentient life. Ippolita felt something akin to pity. The imagined suffering of the tree brought their own pain clearly before them. They dwelt in thought upon the desolate solitude surrounding that miserable little station, through which, from time to time, passed trains full of travellers, each one of whom carried in his heart his own special trouble and anxiety. Distressful images succeeded one another rapidly in their minds,

suggested by the very things they had looked at so gaily but a short time ago. And when these visions dispersed, and their consciousness, ceasing to follow them, returned to themselves, they were aware, in the depths of their hearts, of an all-pervading anguish impossible to describe—regret for the days that are irrevocably lost.

Their love had a long past behind it; through all time it must drag after it an immense net full of dead things.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Ippolita, with a quiver in her voice.

‘And you—what is the matter with you?’ returned Giorgio, looking at her keenly.

Neither answered the other’s question. Silence fell once more, and they continued to gaze through the window. The sky seemed to break into a tearful smile. A furtive gleam of light gilded the summit of one of the hills for a moment and then died out. Other rays broke forth, only to vanish.

‘Ippolita Sanzio,’ said Giorgio, in long-drawn accents, as if to taste the sweetness of her name. ‘How my heart leapt when I found out, at last, that was your name! That name meant so much to me. I had a sister called Ippolita. So your beautiful name was dear to me already. It touched me profoundly. I thought at once: Can it be that my lips will resume their sweet, familiar habit? All that day, the memory of the dear dead wove itself with delicate persistence in my secret dreams. I did not seek you out. I forbore to follow you. I would not be importunate in any way, but at the bottom of my heart I was absolutely assured that one day—sooner or later—you would know me and love me. What delicious sensations were those! I lived outside the world of reality. I fed my soul on music and transcendental literature. I saw you one day at one of Giovanni Sgambati’s concerts, but not until you were just leaving the room. You looked at me. Another time you looked at me (perhaps you remember) when we met at the top of the Via Babuino, right in front of the Piale bookshop.’

‘I have not forgotten.’

'You had a little girl with you.'

'Yes; it was Cecilia, one of my nieces.'

'I stood still to let you pass. I noticed that we were the same height; you were not so pale this time. A feeling of pride flashed through me——'

'Your surmise was right.'

'Do you remember? It was towards the end of March. My confidence increased as time went on. I lived from day to day, looking forward to the rapture of love that was coming to me. Twice I had seen you with a little bouquet of violets. I filled my rooms with violets. Oh, shall I ever forget that spring! Certain morning dreams—so evanescent, so diaphanous, so full of delicate desire—and certain lingering awakenings—my eyes open to the daylight while my spirit was loth to return to the realities of life. I remember, too, certain foolish little tricks, by which I succeeded in exciting a sort of illusory rapture in myself. One day, at the quartet concert, when they played a sonata of Beethoven in which one magnificent passionate phrase kept returning at intervals, I excited myself almost to frenzy by repeating a line of poetry in which your name occurred.'

Ippolita smiled, but felt a touch of resentment at hearing him speak with such evident preference of the very first signs of his love. Was the memory of the past sweeter?—were those days dearer to him than the present?

'All my aversion for the common ways of life,' Giorgio went on, 'would never have led me to imagine a more fantastic and mysterious retreat than the forgotten chapel in the Via Belsiano. Do you remember? The door towards the street at the top of the steps was closed—had been closed probably for years. You went in through a wide passage which smelt of wine; there was a red signboard with a great cork on it—do you remember? You entered the chapel from the back through a sacristy hardly large enough to hold one priest and a sacristan. It was the entrance into the sanctuary of the Holy Wisdom. Oh, those old men and women sitting about in the worm-eaten stalls! Where in the world did Alessandro

Memmi get his audience from? You were probably unaware that you represented Beauty in this gathering of philosophers and musical monomaniacs. There is Martlet, now : that Mr. Martlet is one of the most eminent Buddhists of our day, and his wife has written a book on the Philosophy of Music. The lady sitting next to you was Margarethe Traube-Boll, a celebrated lady-doctor who is continuing the researches of her late husband on the functions of sight. The wizard who came in on tip-toe in a long greenish cloak was a physician, Dr. Fleischl, a German Jew, a remarkable pianist and devotee of Bach. The priest sitting under the cross was Count Castracane, an unrivalled botanist. Another botanist, bacteriologist, and famous microscopist, Cuboni, was just opposite to him. Then there was Jacob Moleschott, the great physiologist, an unforgettable old man, enormous in bulk and simple-hearted as a child. There was Blaserna, Helmholtz's collaborator in the theory of sound ; Mr. Davies, a painter, philosopher, a pre-Raphaelite buried in Brahmanism . . . and a few others besides, all of singular intellect, rare spirits wedded to the most profound study of modern science, cold explorers of life, and passionate devotees of the cult of dreams.'

He paused, calling up the whole scene before his mind's eye. These sages listened to the music with a religious enthusiasm ; some assumed an inspired attitude, some imitated unconsciously the gestures of the conductor, others united their voices to the voices of the choir. The choir, both men and women, occupied a painted wooden platform on which, here and there, a trace of gilding remained. In front were the girls, holding their music on a level with their faces. Below them, on the rough music-stands of the violinists, the lighted candles flickered yellow in the misty blue atmosphere. Here and there a point of golden light was reflected in the polished surface of an instrument, or flashed from the tip of a bow. Alessandro Memmi, rather stiffly upright, with his bald head, short black beard, and gold eye-glasses, faced the choir and beat time with an air at once sober and severe. At the end of each number a murmur ran through the chapel,

while from the platform came the sound of smothered laughter and the rustle of turning leaves. As the sky outside began to brighten, the candles paled. High up, a cross all covered with golden leaves and olives, which had figured formerly in processions, gleamed from the wall. The white and bald heads of the audience shone against the background of dark oak. All at once the sky darkened again, and once more a mist lay over everything. A scarcely perceptible cloud of fragrance—was it incense? basil?—floated in the air. On the solitary altar, two bunches of half-faded violets in glass vases exhaled a breath of spring; and these two dying perfumes seemed to embody the poetry of the visions evoked by the music in the souls of these aged philosophers, while side by side with them, in souls of a totally different nature, very different dreams were arising like the rosy dawn on fading snows. Thus did he cast a lyric glamour over the scene as it lived again in his imagination.

‘Was ever anything more improbable, more incredible,’ he exclaimed, ‘than that in Rome, a city so intellectually languid, a music-master, a Buddhist who has published two volumes of essays on the philosophy of Schopenhauer, should indulge his fancy by having a mass of Sebastian Bach’s performed in a mysterious chapel, before an audience of musically fanatical savants whose daughters were singing in the choir? It might be a page of Hoffmann. On an afternoon in spring, cloudy but mild, these ancient philosophers issue from their laboratories, where they have been striving arduously to tear the secret from the heart of life, and assemble in a little hidden oratory, in order to enjoy to the point of intoxication a taste which they share in common—a passion which raises them above earthly things and transports them into the ideal and visionary world. And in the midst of this assemblage of sages, a tender and dreamlike musical idyl unfolds itself between the cousin of the great Buddhist and his friend. And at the conclusion of the mass, the unconscious Buddhist presents to the divine Ippolita Sanzio her future lover!’

He laughed and rose from his seat. ‘It seems to me

that I have made my commemoration speech quite *en regle*.'

For a moment Ippolita sat absorbed, then she said: 'Do you remember?—it was a Saturday—the eve of Palm Sunday.'

She rose in her turn, pressing a kiss on Giorgio's cheek. 'Shall we go out?' she said; 'it is not raining now.'

They went outside and paced up and down the wet flags, which glistened in the rays of a dying sun. The air struck chill. In the distance the little billowy hills were striped with shafts of light; here and there, large shallow pools of water gave back a pale reflection of the sky, where patches of deep blue were spreading amongst the flaky white clouds. From time to time a fitful gleam lit up the little tree, dripping with wet.

'That little tree will always remain fixed in our memories,' said Ippolita, stopping to look at it. 'It is so forlorn—so very forlorn!'

The ringing of a bell warned them of the approach of the train. It was a quarter-past four. A porter offered to get the tickets.

'When shall we reach Albano?' asked Giorgio.

'About seven o'clock.'

'It will be dark,' said Ippolita, taking Giorgio's arm and shivering slightly. She looked forward with pleasure to their arrival at an unknown hotel on a chilly evening, and to dining alone with him in front of a glowing fire.

'Would you like to go inside again?' asked Giorgio.

'No,' she returned; 'the sun is shining; let us walk quietly up and down—that will warm me again.'

Seized with an unutterable yearning for affection, she clung close to his arm with a caressing touch, and putting forth all her powers of seduction in voice, in glance, and every movement, weaving all her feminine spells about her lover to intoxicate him, to dazzle him with the delights of the present, in order to blind him to the charms of the past, endeavoured to prove herself more lovable, more desirable now than she had been then. An agonising fear assailed her that he was regretting

the woman of those days, that he sighed for the early raptures that were no more, and that he believed that then only had he stood upon love's highest pinnacle. 'His reminiscences fill my heart with melancholy,' she thought to herself, and could scarcely refrain from tears. 'Perhaps he too is saddened—alas, how heavily is love burdened with the past!' And again: 'Perhaps he is tired of me; perhaps unconsciously, without even confessing it to himself, he deludes himself. He may now be incapable of finding any pleasure in me, and if I am dear to him still, it is only because I am, as it were, the keynote to these fond recollections. Even I myself—how rarely do I taste a moment of unmixed happiness at his side! I too suffer—and yet I love him and hug my pain, and my sole desire is to be pleasing to him, and I cannot imagine my life without his love. Why then, if we love one another, should we feel so unhappy?' She leaned more heavily on her lover's arm and looked up at him, the shadow of these thoughts intensifying the devotion of her fond eyes.

'It was about this hour, two years ago, that we left the chapel together, and he spoke to me of things in which love had no part, in a voice that went to my heart—that touched my soul like a pure and ideal caress, and I trembled—trembled from head to foot—as I felt in my heart the birth of an emotion till then unknown. Oh, it was bliss! . . . To-day we have reached our second anniversary, and we love each other still. Just now, while he spoke, his voice touched me in a different way, but as deeply as ever. A perfect evening lies before us—why regret the days gone by? Our present freedom, our absolute intimacy, is surely worth as much as the uncertainty and hesitation of the past. Those very memories should lend an added charm to our passion. I love him and give myself wholly to him. In these two years he has transformed me—made another woman of me; he has given me new senses, a new soul, a new mind. I am his creature, the work of his hands. He can absorb himself in me as in one of his own thoughts—I am all his—now and for ever.' Pressing closer to his side: 'Are you not happy?' she asked.

Moved by the note of passion in her voice, which seemed to envelop him in a warm breath, a sudden wave of real happiness swept over him. 'More than happy!' he replied.

The shriek of the train startled them both. This time they had the compartment to themselves. They closed the windows, waited till the train moved out of the station, and then, clasped in each other's arms, they fell to kissing and lavishing on one another all the endearing names which the love of two years had taught them. Later on, they sat side by side, a faint smile going and coming on their lips and in their eyes, as the mad gallop of their pulses slowly calmed down. Through the dim windows, they watched the monotonous landscape fly past them in a faint violet haze.

'Lie down,' said Ippolita, 'and put your head on my knee.' Giorgio obeyed her.

'The wind has disarranged your moustache'; and with the tips of her fingers she smoothed away a few hairs that had fallen over his lips. He kissed her fingers. Then she ruffled his hair. 'You have very long eyelashes, too,' she remarked. She closed his eyes that she might admire them; and passing her caressing hand over his forehead and his temples, she made him kiss her fingers again one by one as she leaned over him. Looking up at her, he saw her lips part slowly and disclose the snowy whiteness of her teeth. She closed them again, and again they fell apart, slowly, softly, like the petals of a flower, disclosing its heart of pearl.

A delicious languor began to creep over them; they were happy, oblivious of time and space, lulled by the monotonous drone of the train. They exchanged whispered words of adoration.

Presently she said, with a happy smile, 'This is our first journey together; the first time we have been alone together in a train.'

She took a pleasure in asserting that they were doing a new thing. Giorgio raised himself and pressed a kiss upon her neck, right upon the twin beauty-spots, murmuring burning words in her ear.

'Now, you must be good and patient,' she said; 'think what a charming evening is before us.'

Again she saw the quiet little hotel, the room with its old-fashioned furniture and white curtains.

'At this time of year there will not be many people at Albano,' she said, to distract her friend's attention. 'How happy we shall be all alone in the empty hotel! They will take us for a newly married couple!'

She wrapped herself more closely in her mantle with a little shiver, and leaned against Giorgio's shoulder.

'It is quite cold to-day, isn't it? Directly we get there we will have a big fire and a cup of tea.' They went on talking in low tones, exchanging promises, each communicating something of their passion to the other. Then they fell silent and their lips met. They saw nothing, heard nothing, but the tumult of their throbbing pulses. Afterwards, as their close embrace slackened, a veil seemed to be suddenly withdrawn from before their eyes, the enchanted mist rolled away, the fire was cold and dead in the room of their dreams, the silence in the deserted hotel weighed upon the senses, the spell was broken. Ippolita leaned back against the cushions, and gazed dejectedly at the wide, monotonous landscape spreading out into the darkness.

Giorgio, at her side, had meanwhile fallen a prey to his perfidious thoughts, tortured by a horrible vision from which he could not free himself, because he gazed at it with the eyes of his soul—those lidless eyes which no power on earth can close.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Ippolita, perturbed and anxious.

'You!'

He was thinking of her real wedding journey, and the ways of newly married couples. 'No doubt she was alone with her husband as she is now with me; perhaps it is the recollection of that which suddenly makes her so despondent.' He thought of the rapid stolen kisses between two stations—the sudden, quivering emotion when their eyes met, of the sensuous languor of the long summer afternoons.

He started violently—a sign which Ippolita knew well as a symptom of the malady which afflicted her lover. She clasped his hand.

‘You are suffering?’ she asked. He nodded an affirmative, and then turned to her with a dolorous smile. But she had not the courage to inquire further, fearing that he would answer with bitter, wounding words. She preferred his silence to that, but she kissed him lingeringly on the brow, as was her wont in hope of dissipating the cruel tangle of his thoughts.

‘Here we are at Cecchina!’ she exclaimed with relief, as the train steamed into the station. ‘Quick, quick, darling! we must get out!’

She was bright and cheerful in order to cheer him. She let down a window and put out her head.

‘It is cold, but a lovely evening; come, dearest, it is our anniversary, we must be happy!’

He threw off his ugly thoughts at the sound of her clear and tender voice, and the fresh, sharp air calmed and revived him. The rain-drenched landscape was roofed by a sky, clear and cold as a diamond. A ray or two of the sunset still lingered in the diaphanous air. The stars lit up one by one like the branches of a swinging candelabra.

‘We must be happy!’ Giorgio heard the echo of his friend’s words, and his heart swelled with vague aspirations. The quiet room with its lighted fire seemed to him all too humble for the elements of happiness in such a pure and solemn night. ‘It is our anniversary, we must be happy!’ What was he doing—what was he thinking—two years ago at this hour? He was wandering aimlessly through the streets, driven by an instinctive desire for larger space, and yet attracted towards the more populous quarters, where his pride and his pleasure seemed to increase by contrast with the sordid life around him, and where the roar of the city reached his ear fitfully as from afar.

THE old inn of Ludovico Togni, with its vestibule with marbled stucco walls and green doors, affected one instantly with a sense of peace that was almost cloistral. The furniture had a look of homely sobriety. The beds, the chairs, the sofas, all belonged to the fashion of a bygone generation, now fallen into disuse. The painted ceilings, either pale yellow or sky blue, had a garland of roses in the middle, or some other customary design—a lyre, a torch, a quiver. The bouquets on the wall-paper and on the carpet were so faded as to be almost invisible. Unpretentious white curtains hung at the windows on gilt rods; the rococo mirrors, reflecting these old-fashioned objects in their blurred surface, lent them an air of melancholy, almost of unreality, such as stagnant pools give to their banks.

‘How delighted I am to be here!’ exclaimed Ippolita, penetrated by the quiet charm of her surroundings; and curling herself up in a large armchair, she leaned her head against the back, which was adorned by an antimacassar, a modest work in white crochet.

‘I should like to stay here always.’

It reminded her of her childhood and of her Aunt Giovanna who died.

‘Poor aunt! I remember she had a house like this. Each piece of furniture had stood in the same spot for a century. I have never forgotten her despair when I broke one of those glass shades—you know the kind I mean, that you put over artificial flowers. She cried, poor old thing; I can see her now with her black lace cap and her white corkscrew curls down each side of her face.’

She spoke slowly, with frequent breaks, gazing dreamily at the fire blazing on the hearth, smiling at Giorgio from time to time with somewhat heavy-lidded, violet-circled eyes, while from the street rose the regular and monotonous hammering of some stone-breakers on the road.

‘I remember, too, that there was a large loft just under

the roof with two or three dormer windows where the pigeons roosted. You got to it up a little steep staircase, the walls of which were hung—goodness knows since when—with dried rabbit-skins with the fur on, stretched on pieces of crossed stick. I brought food to the pigeons every day. The moment they heard me on the stair they would flock to the door and attack me directly it was opened. I would sit down on the floor and scatter the corn all about, while the pigeons surrounded me. They were all white, and I used to watch them billing and cooing. The sound of a flute came from a house close by—always the same tune at the same hour. I thought it quite ravishing. I used to stand under the window and listen with my mouth open to catch the shower of music as it fell. From time to time a belated pigeon would fly in and flutter round my head, and perhaps leave a feather in my hair. The invisible flute rippled on. I have that tune in my ear now. I could sing it. My passion for music began then in a pigeon-loft.'

And she hummed the air she had heard on the little old flute in Albano, deriving from it the chastened pleasure of a wife who, after long years, comes upon a forgotten sweetmeat at the bottom of her wedding-chest. There was an interval of silence. A bell tinkled somewhere in the quiet inn.

'I remember, too, a lame dove, a great pet of my aunt's, that used to hop about the rooms. One day a little girl came to play with me; she had fair hair, and her name was Clarice. My aunt was in bed with a bad cold, and we were playing on the terrace, to the great detriment of the big pots of carnations. The dove came out, looked at us without the least fear, and went and perched in a corner to enjoy the sun. Clarice instantly rushed at it to catch it. The poor little creature tried to escape, but it limped so funnily that we began to laugh and could not stop. Clarice succeeded in catching it; she was a cruel child. We laughed so much that we did not know what we were doing. The dove beat its wings wildly, and Clarice pulled out a feather; then (I shudder to this day when I think of it) she plucked the bird almost bare, laughing all the time,

and making me laugh, too—just as if we were off our heads. The poor thing, plucked and bleeding, escaped into the house, and we rushed after it. But at that moment my aunt's bell rang, and we could hear her coughing and calling from her bed. Clarice fled down the stairs, while I hid myself behind a curtain. The dove died that same evening, and my aunt sent me back to Rome, fully persuaded that I was guilty of the horrid deed. I never saw her again. How I cried! I still feel remorse about it.'

She spoke in low tones, gazing with dilated eyes at the blaze, which almost seemed to magnetise her, as if she were in the first stage of hypnotism, while from the street rose the measured hammering of the stone-breakers.

VI

ONE day the lovers returned a little tired from the lake of Nemi. They had lunched at the Villa Cesarini, under the gorgeous flowering camelias, and afterwards, quite alone, with all the emotions with which one gazes on the most hidden and secret things, had visited the Mirror of Diana—cold and impenetrable to the eye as a sombre blue glacier.

They ordered tea as usual. Suddenly Ippolita, who was searching for something in her travelling-bag, turned round to Giorgio with a packet in her hand tied with a ribbon.

'Look—your letters! I always carry them about with me.'

'All? You have kept them all?' exclaimed Giorgio, with evident satisfaction.

'Yes—every one—even to the little notes and the telegrams.'

'Do let me see them!' begged Giorgio.

But she hid the packet again almost jealously. Then, as Giorgio advanced towards her smiling, she took refuge in the next room.

'No, no, you are not to have them—I will not let you!'

She refused, partly in fun, but partly, too, because she had always guarded them so jealously, like some secret treasure, both with pride and fear, and she disliked the idea of showing them even to the person who had written them.

'Oh, let me see them—please do! I am so curious to read the letters I wrote two years ago! What did I say?'

'Words that burned like fire.'

'Please—let me see!'

She ended by consenting, vanquished by her lover's coaxing and caresses.

'Well, at any rate, let us wait till they bring the tea, and then we can read them together.'

'Shall I put a light to the fire?'

'No, thanks; it is quite warm to-day.'

It was a white day—the motionless air, all suffused with tremulous points of silver, the pale light softened still more by its passage through the curtains. Violets, freshly plucked at the Villa Cesarini, filled the room with their fragrance.

'Here is Pancrazio,' said Ippolita, hearing a knock at the door. And Pancrazio, the good old waiter, entered with his inextinguishable smile and his inexhaustible teapot. He placed the tea-tray on the table, promised them a tender fowl for the evening meal, and left the room with a light and springy step.

He was quite bald, but still retained an air of juvenility, was extremely handy, and had long, narrow, twinkling eyes, set a little aslant, like certain Japanese idols.

'Pancrazio is decidedly more exhilarating than his tea,' said Giorgio.

It is true the tea was absolutely tasteless, but it gained a certain vague charm from its accessories. The cups and the sugar-basin were of unheard-of shape and capacity; the teapot was illustrated with scenes from a pastoral love-story; the plate containing the slices of lemon bore in the centre in black characters a rhymed conundrum.

Ippolita poured out the tea—the cups smoking like censers—after which she undid the packet. The letters were carefully assorted into small bundles.

‘What a quantity!’ exclaimed Giorgio.

‘Oh, not so very many! There are two hundred and ninety-four; and in two years, my dear friend, there are seven hundred and thirty days!’

They both laughed; then they drew their chairs up, side by side, close to the table. Giorgio felt singularly moved at the sight of these written evidences of his love—an emotion as delicate as it was strong. The first letters agitated and confused him strangely. The exaggerated condition of mind which some of the letters revealed seemed to him quite incomprehensible. The lyric fervour of certain passages filled him with amazement. The violence and tumult of his youthful passion almost terrified him, when contrasted with the calm which encompassed him in this retired and silent little inn. In one letter it said: ‘How my heart sighed for you all last night! A nameless anguish took hold on me, even during the short spells of sleep, and I kept awake that I might escape the clutches of the spectres that rose up out of the depths of my spirit. One sole thought possessed me—one thought alone kept me on the rack: that you might go away and leave me. Never has the possibility of that event caused me such terror or such agony. I feel at this moment the assurance—clear, certain, absolute—that without you life would be a sheer impossibility. At the mere idea of losing you the daylight darkens—the sun becomes a horror to me, the earth a bottomless pit—I enter the valley of the shadow.’ In another letter, written after Ippolita’s departure: ‘I have to make a tremendous effort in order to hold my pen. I have not a spark of energy or will left in me—vanquished by such profound depression of spirit that the only sense remaining to me is that of an insupportable nausea at being alive at all. The sky is grey—the air suffocating, heavy as lead—a homicidal day, so to speak. The hours pass with inexorable slowness, and from minute to minute my anguish waxes more poignant and hideous. I feel as if the bottom of my soul were filled with a pool of stagnant water. Are my sufferings moral or physical? I know not. I lie stupefied

and inert beneath the weight of a burden which crushes, but will not kill me.' In another: 'Your letter reached me at last to-day—at four o'clock—when I had given it up in despair. I have read and re-read it a thousand times—seeking between the lines the unutterable—all that you have been unable to express, the secret of your soul—something even sweeter and more fraught with life than the words written on the insentient paper. I have a terrible yearning for you. I examined the paper for some trace of your hand, your breath, your gaze—in vain. I would give all I possess for some slight token of your presence. Send me some flower which you have kissed—make a mark on the paper where you have pressed your lips. Let me have, in imagination, some caress that you send me out of the far, far distance. How long is it since I kissed you—since I held you in my arms and saw you grow pale beneath my passionate gaze? A year—a century? Where have you gone? What worlds, what oceans lie between us? I pass the hours in absolute immobility—thinking, thinking. This room of mine is sombre and funereal as a crypt. Now and then I see myself stretched upon a bier. I gaze contemplatively at my own form in all the immobility of death with imperturbable lucidity of vision; and I arise from that contemplation calmed and soothed!' Thus the love-letters moaned and wailed, spread out upon the coarse and simple inn table-cloth, beside the rustic cups in which an innocent infusion steamed gently.

'Do you remember?' said Ippolita. 'That was when I left Rome for the first time, and only for a fortnight.'

Giorgio, absorbed in the recollection of these frenzied emotions, strove to revive them in himself—to understand them. But the surrounding atmosphere of comfort was most unfavourable to such efforts. The tempered light, the steaming beverage, the scent of the violets, the personal contact with Ippolita—all combined to lull him into a state of moral cowardice. 'Has the fervour of those days gone out of me so completely?' he mused. 'No; even during her very last absence I suffered no whit less cruelly.' But for all that, he

was unsuccessful in his attempts to reconcile the Ego of those days with the Ego of the present. He failed to recognise himself in the despairing, broken-hearted man of those letters. He felt that this was not the style in which he would now express his love, and recognised at a glance the vacuity of the phrases. These letters were like the epitaphs on gravestones. As the epitaphs convey but a gross and false impression of the person they commemorate, so these letters failed signally in reproducing the varied stages of emotion through which the lover passed. He was well acquainted with the extraordinary fever of excitement which seizes upon a man while he writes a love-letter. By the onslaught of that fever, a thousand varied waves of emotion are set heaving and tossing in one mad whirlpool. The lover is not fully conscious of all he wishes to express, and is impeded by the practical inadequacy of language as a means towards that end. Being forced, therefore, to renounce all hope of describing his passion as it really is, he strives to convey its intensity by exaggerated phrases and by resorting to the commonplace tricks of rhetoric. And that is why one love-letter differs so little from another, and the language of the sublimest passion is little more than jargon.

‘Here all is violence, frenzy, excess,’ he thought to himself; ‘but where are all the delicate emanations of my soul—where my exquisite, intricate melancholy—those profound and tortuous sorrows in which the soul loses itself as in an inextricable labyrinth?’ He recognised with keen regret that in these letters the rarer qualities of his soul were missing—those qualities to the cultivation of which he had always devoted the utmost care. Gradually, as he proceeded in his perusal, he began skipping whole pages of pure rhetoric, on the lookout rather for trivial facts, details of occurrences, or allusions to memorable episodes.

In one letter, for instance: ‘About ten o’clock I went by force of habit to the Morteo garden where we had met so often in the evening. Those last thirty-five minutes before the actual moment of your departure were simply torture. You were going—going, without my being able to see you—

to cover your face with kisses for the last time—do not forget—do not forget. Towards eleven, some instinct made me turn round. Your husband came in with a friend and the lady who generally accompanies them. No doubt they were returning after seeing you off. I was seized with such a passion of pain that I was obliged to get up and leave the place. The presence of those three persons, laughing and talking as usual, just as if nothing had happened, exasperated me. They impressed upon me, beyond all doubt or uncertainty, that you were gone—gone beyond recall.’

He recalled those summer evenings on which he had seen Ippolita seated at a table between her husband and an infantry officer; opposite to her, a silly little woman. He knew none of the three, but their every gesture, their attitudes, their commonplace appearance, was an offence to him, and he imagined the imbecility of their conversation to which his refined and elegant friend appeared to give her undivided attention.

He read in another letter: ‘To-day I am full of doubt and suspicion—of hostility towards you and sullen anger. I shall go out presently and go down to the sea. The waves are strong and joyous. Addio!—I shall write no more for fear of saying bitter things. Addio! Do you love me? or do you only write me words of love from habit? Are you loyal to me? What do you think about? What are you doing? I am suffering—I have the right to ask these piercing questions—I have doubts—I am distraught.’

‘That,’ said Ippolita, ‘was when I was in Rimini, August and September—what stormy months! Do you remember when you arrived at last in the *Don Juan*?’

Here is a letter written on board: ‘To-day, about two o’clock, we cast anchor at Ancona, having come in under sail from Porto San Giorgio. Your prayers and good wishes brought us favourable winds. We have had a wonderful passage—I will tell you about it later on. We put off again at dawn. The *Don Juan* is the king of cutters. Your flag is fluttering from the mast—Addio!—perhaps only till tomorrow!—2nd of September.’

'We did meet, but what days of torture! Do you remember? We were constantly watched. Oh, that sister-in-law or mine! Do you remember our excursion to the temple of the Malatestas, and that pilgrimage to the church of San Giuliano, the evening before you left?'

'This is one from Venice.'

They re-read it together with hearts that throbbed in sympathy. 'Here I am in Venice since nine o'clock this morning—*plus triste que jamais!* Venice appals me. No vision, however dazzling, could equal in splendour that one which rises out of the sea and blossoms under the magical sky. I am faint with sadness and desire. Why are you not here? If you had but come as you proposed a while ago! We might possibly have snatched an hour from their vigilance, and have added one more—the fairest of all—to our innumerable reminiscences.' Further on they read: 'A curious idea flashes through my mind, from time to time, moving me profoundly—a wild fancy—a dream. I dream that you might suddenly appear in Venice—*à l'improviste*—for me, and me alone!' And again: 'The beauty of Venice is the natural and appropriate setting to your beauty. Your colouring, so rich and warm, pale amber melting into gold with just a tinge of languid rose—that is the ideal colouring which harmonises most happily with the Venetian atmosphere. I do not know what Caterina Cornaro, queen of Cyprus, may have been like, but I cannot help thinking she must have resembled you. Yesterday I passed her magnificent palace on the Canalazzo—it seemed to breathe poetry. Surely, once upon a time, you inhabited that regal home—you leaned from that priceless balcony and watched the sunbeams dance upon the waters. Farewell, Ippolita! I possess no marble palace on the Grand Canal worthy of your sovereignty, nor are you mistress of your acts.'

Then further on again: 'Here is concentrated all the glory of Paolo Veronese. A Veronese which I saw a little while ago reminded me of our pilgrimage in Rimini to the church of San Giuliano. We were downhearted enough that evening.

After leaving the church we strolled slowly away into the country along the bank of the river, towards that great group of distant trees. Do you remember? It was the last time we saw each other—our last talk together. The last time! Ah, supposing, after all, you were to appear suddenly in Venice from Vignola?’

‘You see,’ said Ippolita, ‘it was a continuous seduction, refined and irresistible. You cannot imagine what I went through. I could not sleep at night for thinking of some plan for getting away alone without exciting the suspicion of my people. I performed a very miracle of cunning. I do not know how I did it. When I found myself alone with you in a gondola on the Grand Canal, that early morning in September, I could not believe that it was real. Do you remember? I burst into tears and could not speak a single word.’

‘Ah, but I expected you, I was quite certain you would come, let it cost what it might!’

‘That was the first great imprudence.’

‘Quite true.’

‘Well, what does it matter! Was it not far better so? Was it not better that I should give myself wholly to you? I regret nothing.’

Giorgio kissed her, and they went on talking of this episode—perhaps one of the sweetest and most memorable of any they had to recall. They lived over again their two days in the hotel Danieli—two days of utter oblivion and supremest rapture, when they seemed to lose all consciousness of the outer world, lost to everything but one another.

These days marked for Ippolita the beginning of the end. The following letters made allusion to her first troubles. ‘When I think I am the initial cause of your sufferings and of your domestic worries, I am seized with unspeakable remorse; and I want you to understand my overwhelming passion for you, that you may forgive me what I have brought upon you. Do you know it—do you understand it? Are you quite sure that my love is worth all your

trouble? Are you sure, certain, absolutely convinced from the bottom of your heart?' His ardour increased from page to page. Then there came a long interval of silence, from April to July. It was during these months that the final break-up occurred. The husband, too weak to overcome Ippolita's open and obstinate rebellion, took refuge in flight, leaving his affairs in a hopeless tangle, which swallowed up the greater part of his fortune. Ippolita found a home first with her mother and afterwards with a sister at a country house at Caronno. Here a terrible malady from which she had suffered as a child—a sort of epilepsy—attacked her again. The letters dated August said: 'You cannot conceive of the horror that has taken possession of me. At the root of my torment lies that implacably clear mental vision. I can *see* your writhing limbs, I *see* your features distorted and livid, and your poor despairing eyes under the lids that are all swollen with tears. I am as conscious of all the horrors of your ailment as if I were at your side all the time—and do what I will, I cannot rid myself of the ghastly vision. And I *hear* you call me, I actually have the sound of your voice in my ear—the hoarse and woful voice of one who cries for help but has no hope of rescue.' Then three days later: 'Oh, poor, poor love! I feel so wretched that I wish I might lose all sense of being for a long time, and then awake to remember nothing of all these sufferings. Would, at least, I could have some acute physical pang—a wound, a stab, a terrible burn—anything to distract my attention from the torments of my soul. Mio Dio! I see your convulsed and pallid hands—between the fingers a torn lock of hair.'

Later on: 'You write—What if this should seize upon me when I am with you? No—no—I never can, I never will see you again! Were you mad when you wrote that? Did you think for a moment of what you were saying? It is as if you had taken my very life from me—as if I could not breathe. Write to me again at once. Tell me that you will

recover, that you do not despair—that you want to see me. You *must* get well. Do you hear, Ippolita?—you *must*.' And again: 'You despair unnecessarily. I passed the greater part of yesterday indoors reading a treatise on nervous ailments in order to find out as much as possible about your particular case. I am certain you will recover. I think you will have no more attacks, and that your convalescence will run an uninterrupted course, ending in complete cure. Be reassured, therefore. Did you *hear* my unceasing thought of you throughout the night? It was a gloomy, mournful night, full of the low chanting of hymns. A band of pilgrims passed along the highroad, chanting in chorus long, monotonous hymns.'

During her convalescence the letters became tender and caressing. 'I send you a flower gathered in the sand—a kind of wonderful wild lily with such a poignant scent that I often find an insect at the bottom of the calix actually dead of the honeyed intoxication. The whole shore is covered with these passion-breathing lilies, which, under this tropical sun and on these burning sands, open almost instantaneously and only last a few hours. Even in death, look how spiritual the flower is—so fine—so essentially feminine!'

The letters followed one another regularly up till the first days of November; but by degrees they grew bitter, worrying—full of suspicion, doubts, reproaches.

'How far away from me you have gone! And it is not alone the pain of the actual separation that hurts me: I feel as if your soul too were detaching itself from me—deserting me. Your eyes, your voice, are making others happy. Write some assurance that you are still my own in every word and thought and deed, that you long for me, and that, separated from me, you have no pleasure in a single moment of life. I think—think—think, and every thought is an intolerable pang. The mere act of breathing is an almost unbearable fatigue to me, and the throbbing of my heart irritates me like the thud of a hammer I am condemned to listen to for ever. And is this love? Never! It can only be some monstrous

infirmity which flourishes in *me alone*—for my sole joy and torment—a feeling, it pleases me to think, no other human being has ever experienced but myself. Yesterday morning, about midday, I was absorbed in the thought of death. The spirit of my poor uncle Demetrius has been about me these days, and my whole state of mind had become so intolerable that suddenly the thought of *freedom* presented itself vividly before me. The crisis passed, and to-day I can afford to smile at it a little, but nevertheless I have had a pretty sharp encounter with death.'

At the beginning of November, Giorgio was again in Rome awaiting Ippolita's return, and the letters dating from thence made allusion to some painful and unspecified episode. 'You write :—I have had a hard struggle to remain faithful to you. What do you mean by that? What are the dreadful occurrences which have so upset you? Dio mio ! how you have changed ! I suffer inexpressibly, and my pride revolts against my suffering. A line has graven itself between my brows, like the scar of a deep wound, and there all my suppressed anger, my bitter doubts and suspicions, have accumulated and gathered themselves together. I scarcely think that even your kisses will be able to smooth it away. The passionate desire that breathes from your letters only perturbs and troubles me. I cannot thank you for it. For two or three days I have had something against you in my heart—I do not know exactly what. Is it a presentiment?—a forecast?'

To Giorgio, the perusal of these letters was like the re-opening of an old wound. Ippolita tried to restrain him from reading more.

'That is enough, Giorgio !' she entreated ; 'do not read any more !' and pressing her lover's face between her hands, she kissed him on the eyes—'do not, I implore you !'

She succeeded in drawing him away from the table, and he smiled that inscrutable smile with which a sick man accedes to the wishes of others, well knowing that the remedy is both useless and too late.

VII

ON the evening of Good Friday they set out again for Rome.

Before starting, about five o'clock, they took some tea. They were very silent. Now that it was over, the simple life they had led in this little out-of-the-way hotel seemed to them immeasurably beautiful and desirable, the charm of this modest room far sweeter and deeper than before—another fragment of their life and love broken off and dropped into the fathomless abyss of Time.

'So this too is over,' said Giorgio at last.

They gazed into each other's eyes, communicating to one another the emotion that seemed to choke them and prevent them speaking. So they sat silent, listening to the regular beat of the stone-breakers' hammers in the road below, though the monotonous sound only served to aggravate their sufferings, till Giorgio rose from his seat unable to bear it any longer.

The even blows reminded him too forcibly of the flight of time, reviving in him the sensation of terror and anxiety which often assailed him at the ticking of a clock. And yet, in the preceding days, how often that same sound had lulled him with a vague sense of pleasure. 'In two or three hours,' he thought to himself, 'we shall be separated ; I shall go back to the old life of petty annoyances, and my old trouble will inevitably seize upon me again. Besides, I know what the spring always brings with it for me. I suffer without intermission, and I have a strong foreboding that one of my most pitiless torments will be the idea that Exili put in my head the other day. Even if Ippolita had the desire to cure me, could she? Perhaps—at least in part. Why should she not come with me to some remote and solitary spot and stay with me, not for a week, but for a long time ! She is quite adorable in such close intimacy, full of consideration and forethought and pretty winning ways. More than once she has seemed to me more like

a sister than a mistress—*gravis dum suavis*—the woman of my dreams. Her constant presence and care might possibly achieve my cure, or at least make my life brighter to me.'

He stood before Ippolita and took both her hands in his. 'Have you been very happy during these few days—tell me?' he asked in caressing, insinuating tones.

'Happier than ever in my life before,' she answered.

Touched by the unmistakable sincerity of her tone, Giorgio clasped her hands still tighter. 'Shall you be able to take up your life again as usual?' he asked.

'I do not know,' she replied. 'I never look beyond the moment. You know that I have nothing more to hope for,' she added, dropping her eyes.

Giorgio clasped her passionately in his arms. 'You do love me, don't you—I am your one aim and object in life—you see no one but me in your future?'

A sudden smile flashed into her eyes and raised the drooping lashes. 'You know it is so,' she answered.

'You know my trouble,' he said in a low voice, pressing her face against his breast.

She evidently divined her lover's thought; in a half whisper, as if to limit her confidence strictly to the circle of space within which they two breathed and palpitated, 'What can I do to cure you?'

For all answer he clasped her closer. Neither spoke, but in the silence their minds were occupied in weighing and determining upon the same thing.

'Come to me,' Giorgio broke the silence at last, 'we will go away to some unknown place and stay all the springtime through—all the summer—as long as we can . . . and you shall cure me.'

Without a moment's hesitation, she answered, 'Take me—I am yours!'

He unclasped her clinging arms, consoled and encouraged. They made their final preparations for departure. Ippolita gathered up all the flowers out of the vases, though most of them were faded already—the violets from the Villa Cesarini,

the cyclamen, the anemonies and periwinkles from the Parco Chigi and dog-roses from Castel Gondolfo, and a branch of almond blossom gathered as they returned from the Baths of Diana. What idylls those flowers could have told! O that wild race down a steep path in the park, over dry leaves into which you sank up to the ankles! She screamed and laughed as she ran, for the nettles stung her through the fine web of her silk stockings, and Giorgio went on in front beating down the plants with his cane, so that she might tread with impunity. Masses of extraordinarily green nettles carpeted the Baths of Diana, a mysterious grotto where some beneficent echo transformed the slow drip of the water into music. And from out its moist and shadowy depths she gazed at the country beyond, all covered with almond and peach blossom, a mass of silver and rose-colour! Every flower had its memory.

'Look!' she said, holding up a little piece of pasteboard, 'that is the ticket for Segni-Palano—I shall keep it.'

Pancrazio knocked at the door. He brought back the receipted bill. Overcome by the signora's generosity, he was more than profuse in his thanks and good wishes, and finally drew from his pocket two visiting-cards, which he offered them 'as a remembrance of his humble name and apologies for the liberty.' After he was gone the supposed *novelli sposi* burst out laughing. On the cards was written in a flourishing hand: Pancrazio Petrella.

'We will keep this with the rest,' said Ippolita.

Pancrazio knocked once more. This time he brought a present for the signora—four or five magnificent oranges. His eyes fairly beamed from his jovial red face.

It was time to go. As they descended the stairs, the lovers felt a cloud of sadness, even of fear, envelop them, as if, on leaving this peaceful retreat, they would be confronted by some unknown peril. The old innkeeper took leave of them at the door.

'I had such beautiful larks for your dinner this evening,' he said regretfully. Giorgio's lips quivered as he answered, 'We shall soon come back—very soon.'

As they went to the station, the sun, looming red through the mists, sank into the sea on the uttermost line of the horizon. At Cecchina it became to rain, and Rome, where they separated, seemed to them on that damp and foggy Good Friday evening a city in which one could only die.

BOOK II—HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

I

ABOUT the end of April, Ippolita was called to Milan by her sister, whose mother-in-law had just died. Giorgio had planned to go away at the same time in search of 'the undiscovered country,' and the middle of May was to find them together again.

But just as he was preparing to leave, Giorgio received a miserable letter from his mother, almost despairing, which obliged him to return without delay to his father's house. As soon as he grasped the fact, that it was his imperative duty to go where this real trouble called him, he fell into a state of mind in which his first impulse of filial affection was gradually undermined by a growing sense of irritation, rendered more poignant as the inevitable scenes of the coming conflict rose more clearly and numerous before his mental vision, and the intolerant voice of egoism sounded more and more persistently out of the depths of his heart—an irritation which at last dominated him wholly, and which the material discomforts attending his departure and the pain of tearing himself away from Ippolita were not calculated to diminish.

Their separation seemed more cruel than ever before. Giorgio was going through a period of acute nervous tension, which seemed to preclude the possibility of his promised happiness and the hope of future peace; and when Ippolita at last said farewell to him, he asked: 'Shall we ever meet again?'

As she passed through the door, and he pressed a last kiss upon her lips, he noticed that she drew a little black veil down over that kiss—an insignificant detail enough, but one which

caused him a bitter heart-pang and assumed the proportions of a sinister augury in his mind.

On his arrival, finally, at his parental home in Guardiagrele, he was so utterly worn out that he wept like a child on his mother's shoulder. But neither those tears nor her tender embraces had any power to relieve him. He felt that he was a stranger in his boyhood's home, and in a family to which he did not belong. The curious sense of isolation which assailed him in the midst of his fellow-creatures rose up within him now stronger and more importunate than before. Many of the little peculiarities, incident to family life, exasperated and offended him. Certain intervals of silence during the meals, when nothing was heard but the rattle of the knives and forks, irritated him almost beyond endurance. Hardly a moment passed but what some rule of the fastidious customs habitual to him was broken, causing him a painful shock. The atmosphere of discord—of hostility, amounting to open warfare—which permeated the house positively choked him.

The very evening of his arrival his mother had taken him aside, and told him the long story of her troubles and humiliations, and of her husband's many sins of omission and commission.

'Your father is a villain !' she had cried, her voice shaken with anger and her eyes full of tears. Her eyelids were red and swollen with much weeping ; her cheeks were hollow, and her whole person bore the visible impress of suffering long endured.

'He is a villain—a villain !'

When he went up to his own room afterwards, Giorgio carried the sound of that voice in his ears, and saw his mother's gestures, and heard the ignominy and reproaches heaped upon the man whose blood ran in his veins. He felt as if he could not drag himself one step further, as if his heart must break. But suddenly a frenzied longing for his absent love took hold on him, directing his thoughts into a new channel, and roused in him a sense of resentment against his mother

for revealing these horrors to him ; he would infinitely rather have remained in ignorance of them, have occupied himself solely with his love, and have known no sufferings but those connected with that love.

He entered his room and closed the door. The May moon flooded the balcony, and, thirsting for the night air, he opened the window, and leaning on the balustrade drank in long draughts of nocturnal freshness. Infinite peace brooded over the valley ; La Majella, still white with snow, seemed to fill the heavens with the grand simplicity of its majestic outlines. Guardiagrele lay sleeping like a flock of white sheep around the cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore. A single yellow light shone from the window of a house close by.

He forgot his recent grievance. Confronted by the splendour of the night, his one thought resolved itself into—Alas ! that such a night should be lost to love !

He listened : through the silence came the stamp of a horse in an adjacent stable, and then the faint jingle of bells. He turned his eyes towards the lighted window, and saw shadows pass across the square of light as of persons moving in the room. He listened again, fancying that he heard a low tap at the door. He went to open it to make sure.

It was his aunt Gioconda. ‘Have you forgotten me?’ she asked, embracing him.

It was true that, not having seen her on his arrival, he had forgotten all about her. He excused himself, and, taking her by the hand, put her in a chair and spoke to her affectionately.

She was his father’s eldest sister, and about sixty years of age. She was lame from the effects of a fall, and somewhat stout, but with an unwholesome stoutness—pale and flaccid. Wholly absorbed in religious exercises, she lived her own life shut away from the rest of the family on the upper floor of the house, neglected, unloved, regarded as semi-imbecile. Her world was made up of sacred pictures, relics, emblems, symbols ; her sole occupation, religious practices, sighing out her life in the monotony of prayer, and enduring the cruel

tortures imposed on her by her greediness—for she adored sweet things, turning in disgust from any other kind of food, and very often she had to go without. Giorgio therefore was high in favour with her because, whenever he came home, he never failed to bring her a large quantity of sweetmeats.

‘Well,’ she said, mumbling through her poor old toothless jaws, ‘well, so you have come back! Eh! come back?’

She looked at him half timidly, not knowing what else to say, but there was a gleam of evident expectation in her eyes. Giorgio felt his heart contract with a pang of pity. This poor creature, he thought, who has sunk to the last depths of human degradation—this miserable, bigoted old sweet-tooth is connected with me by the insuperable tie of blood—she and I belong to the same race.

‘Well,’ she repeated, seized with obvious anxiety, and her expression grew almost impudent.

‘Oh, Aunt Gioconda, I am so sorry,’ he answered at last with a painful effort, ‘I quite forgot to get your sweets this time.’

The old lady’s face suddenly changed as if she were going to be ill, the light died out of her eyes. ‘Never—mind,’ she said brokenly.

‘But I will get you some to-morrow,’ Giorgio hastened to console her; ‘I can get some easily—I will write——’

Aunt Gioconda rallied. ‘You can get them at the Ursuline convent, you know,’ she said hurriedly.

A pause ensued, during which she no doubt enjoyed a foretaste of the delight of the morrow; for, judging by the little gurgling noises in her throat, her toothless mouth was apparently watering at the prospect.

‘Poor Giorgio! Ah, what should I do without my Giorgio! You see what is happening in this house? It is a judgment from Heaven. Come on to the balcony and look at the flower-pots. I—I water them always, and it is I who always think of Giorgio. It used to be Demetrio, but now I have only you.’

She rose and, taking her nephew by the hand, led him on

to the balcony and showed him the flowers. Then she bent down to feel if the earth in the pots was dry.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said.

‘Where are you going, Aunt Gioconda?’

‘Wait.’ She limped away, and returned shortly with a jug of water which she could hardly carry.

‘But, dear aunt, why all this trouble?’

‘The pots want watering. If I did not think of it, I wonder who would!’ She watered the pots. The laboured breath came from the aged chest with a hoarse rattle which was painful to the young man’s ears.

‘That is surely enough?’ he said at last, taking the jug from her hand.

They remained on the balcony while the water from the pots dripped with little splashes on to the street below.

‘Whose is that lighted window?’ asked Giorgio, breaking the silence.

‘Oh,’ replied his aunt, ‘that is where Don Defendente Scioli is: he is dying.’ And they both watched the shadows trembling on the square of yellow light. The old lady began to shiver in the night air.

‘Come, Aunt Gioconda, you must go to bed,’ and he led her away to her room on the floor above. In the corridor they encountered something dragging itself heavily across the tiled floor. It was a tortoise.

‘It is just the same age as you—twenty-five,’ she stopped to remark. ‘It is lame like me—a kick from your father.’

It reminded him of the story of the plucked turtle-dove and Aunt Giovanna, and of certain moments in the days in Albano.

‘The door of her room was open, and a nauseating odour of general unwholesomeness streamed out. The feeble rays of a lamp disclosed the walls covered with Madonnas and crucifixes, a torn screen, and a chair showing the springs and stuffing.

‘Will you come in?’

‘No, thank you, aunt; you must go to bed.’

She entered hurriedly, and returned to the door with a twist

of paper from which she poured a little sugar into the palm of her hand.

‘You see? That is all I have left!’

‘To-morrow, aunt, to-morrow. Go to bed now; good-night.’

And he retired quickly, sickened and disheartened.

Returning to the balcony, the full moon hung in mid-heaven. La Majella, inert and glacial, seemed like one of those lunar mountains which the telescopes bring nearer to the earth. Guardiaagrele slumbered at its foot.

‘Ippolita! Ippolita!’ His whole soul went out to his beloved in that moment of supreme anguish, calling on her for help. ‘Ippolita!’

A sudden wail from the lighted window rent the silence of the night—a woman’s cry. Other voices took up the cry and then changed to a long-drawn sob which rose and fell in rhythmic cadence. The death-agony was over; a soul had gone out into the imperturbable, pitiless night.

II

‘You must come to my assistance,’ said his mother; ‘you will have to speak to him and make him listen to you. You are the eldest-born. There is nothing else to be done, Giorgio.’ And she went on to detail her husband’s backslidings, uncovering his father’s shame to her son.

It appeared that the father was living with a woman who had formerly been a servant of the family, a debased and grasping creature. It was on her and the children born of their adulterous connection that he lavished his whole substance, without the slightest regard to any other claims, neglecting his property, selling the crops to the first comer at any price, just for the sake of the ready money. It even went so far that here at home they were sometimes without the bare necessities of life; and he refused to give a marriage portion to his younger daughter, although she had long been betrothed, and when they ventured to allude to the subject,

he answered with cries and objurgations, sometimes even by more insulting violence.

‘You live far away from us; you have no conception of the hell we live in. You cannot even imagine the smallest part of what we suffer. . . . But you are the eldest—you must speak to him—you must, Giorgio—yes, you will have to.’

Giorgio, his eyes bent on the ground, was silently concentrating all his forces on repressing, as best he could, the frightful exasperation of his nerves in the presence of the wounds revealed to him thus brutally. Could this be his mother? Those convulsively drawn lips which took on such bitter lines as she uttered the crude words; was that his mother’s mouth? Had sorrow and anger wrought this dreadful change? He raised his eyes to her face, seeking in it some traces of the gentleness of old. How sweet and gentle had been the mother of bygone days; what a tender and gracious creature once on a time! How devotedly he had loved her in his childhood and youth. Donna Silveria was tall and graceful, pale and delicately fair, but with dark eyes, and bearing in her whole appearance an unmistakable air of breeding, for she came of that family of Spina which, in company with the Aurispa, displays its sculptured scutcheon under the great portico of Santa Maria Maggiore. Each brusque gesture of the mother was a sword-thrust in the son’s heart, each acrid word, every swift change of expression wrought by the storm of passion and rancour that swept over her. It was painful to him besides to see his father covered with shame and ignominy, to know that so terrible a gulf yawned between the two beings to whom he owed his life.

‘Do you hear me, Giorgio?’ she persisted. ‘You must take some energetic step. When will you speak to him? Make up your mind.’

He heard, but a shuddering horror gripped his very vitals, and he cried out in his heart: ‘O mother! ask me anything—ask the most hideous sacrifice of me, but not this—spare me this step—do not force it upon me. I am a miserable coward!’ An invincible repugnance rose from the very roots

of his being at the thought of thus standing up to his father, of taking upon himself to act with vigour and determination. Far rather would he have cut off a hand. But he answered in a choking voice, 'Very well, mother, I will speak to him ; I will seize some favourable opportunity.'

He took her in his arms and kissed her faded cheek, as if tacitly craving pardon for that lie, for he was perfectly assured in his own mind that he would do nothing of the sort. They were standing near the window ; his mother opened the sash, and they leaned over the balcony side by side.

'They will soon be taking away Don Defendente Scioli's body,' she said ; then added, looking up at the sky, 'What a day !'

Guardiagrele, the city of stone, shone resplendent in the serene May sunshine. In every little crevice, from top to bottom, Santa Maria Maggiore was decked with dainty little creepers, blossoming with innumerable tiny violet flowers, so that the venerable cathedral rose into the azure sky covered with a double mantle of living blossoms and marble flowers.

Meanwhile Giorgio was thinking :—'I have a dark foreboding that I shall never see Ippolita again. I know that, five or six days hence, I shall go in search of the hermitage of our dreams, but I know, at the same time, that it will be in vain, that I shall not succeed, that some obstacle will obstruct my path. How strange and indefinable are my instinctive feelings in this matter ! It is not *I* that know, but something in me that tells me all is over.' . . . 'She does not write to me,' he went on. 'Since I have been here, she has only telegraphed to me twice, once from Pallanza and once from Bellagio. She has never been so far away from me. Perhaps at this very moment some other man has taken her fancy. Can love fall dead at one stroke in a woman's heart ? Why not ? Everything is possible in that inner world. Her heart is a-weary. Who knows but that in Albano I had its last love-throbs and I was deluded. But to the seeing eye certain facts carry in them a secret significance independent of appearances. Thus, when I come to review the details of

our life at Albano, they all point to one definite and incontrovertible conclusion, they were *final*. When, on Good Friday evening, we parted in the station at Rome and she drove away into the mist and gloom, did I not say to myself that I had lost her irretrievably and for ever? Was I not profoundly convinced that that was the end?' He recalled the gesture with which Ippolita drew the black veil over his last kiss. The sunshine, the flowers, the smiling aspect of everything around him, only served to accentuate the thought, 'Life without her is simply impossible!'

At that moment his mother leaned over the balustrade, and looking towards the door of the cathedral, 'They are coming out,' she said.

The door opened, and the funeral bearers issued forth with the insignia of their office. Four men, their faces masked by the hoods of the fraternity, carried the coffin on their shoulders. Two long lines of men similarly hooded followed, bearing lighted candles in their hands, their eyes gleaming through the holes of their masks. The flames of the candles flickered in the fresh breeze, which extinguished one or other of them from time to time. Beside each man there walked a bare-footed child, who caught the drops of melted wax as they fell from the candles in the hollow of his hand.

As soon as the procession was complete, a band of musicians, dressed in red and with white feathers in their hats, struck up a funeral march, the procession regulated its steps to the music, while the instruments flashed in the sunshine.

'How sad and ridiculous are the honours rendered to the dead,' thought Giorgio, and he saw himself in the coffin, shut in between the four wooden walls, borne along by these masquerading people, and escorted by torches and the hideous blare of brass instruments. It filled him with disgust. Then his attention was attracted to these little gutter children catching the tears of wax in their hands, running along at an uneven pace, their bodies bent, their eyes anxiously fixed upon the flickering lights.

'Poor Don Defendente,' murmured the mother, as she

watched the procession move away ; and then, as if speaking to herself and not to her son, she added wearily, 'Why poor indeed ? He has entered into his rest ; it is we who are left behind him to toil on who are to be pitied.'

Giorgio looked at her ; their eyes met, and a smile passed over her face like a shadow, but so faint as not to disturb one of its sad lines. But to her son it had the effect of a sudden illumination, by the light of which he realised for the first time fully the irremediable ravages that sorrow had made in his mother's face.

A wave of passionate tenderness swelled up in his bosom at the terrible revelation of that smile. His mother, his own dear mother could only smile in that way now, had no other smile but that ! Those marks of anguish were indelibly graven on the dear face which had so often bent over him lovingly in illness or in grief. His mother was wasting away, consumed by affliction, sinking slowly into the inevitable grave. And what had he done just now when his mother had poured out her griefs to him ? It was not her troubles that distressed him, but the discomfort of his own offended egoism, the shock to his overstrung nerves caused by the unvarnished mode of expressing her troubles.

'O mother !' he stammered, his voice choked with tears, taking her two hands and drawing her into the room.

'What is it, Giorgio ? Dear son, what is it ?' she asked, frightened at the tears that streamed down his face. 'Tell me what is the matter.'

Oh ! that was the voice, the dear, never-to-be-forgotten voice which never failed to touch him to the heart ; that voice of consolation, of pardon, of counsel, of infinite goodness to which he had listened even in his darkest moments ! He had found it again ! He recognised once more the fond, the adored mother of the old days.

'O mother ! mother !' He encircled her with his arms, sobbing, bathing her in scalding tears, covering her cheeks, her eyes, her brow with kisses in a wild transport of emotion.

'Poor mother mine !' He made her sit down, and, kneeling

in front of her, he gazed at her long, as if he now saw her for the first after a long absence.

The sobs rose in her throat, and her lips trembled convulsively as she asked, 'I have hurt you sorely?'

She wiped away her boy's tears and stroked his hair fondly, while in a voice broken by sobs she said: 'No, no, Giorgio, you must not worry yourself, you must not suffer. God has mercifully kept you far away from this house—you must not suffer. All my life long, ever since you were born, I have always tried to spare you pain, sorrow, or sacrifice, and this time, why had I not the sense to hold my tongue! I ought not to have spoken, I ought not to have told you anything. Forgive me, Giorgio; I did not mean to hurt you so. Do not weep so, I implore you! Giorgio, I cannot bear it!'

She was on the point of bursting into uncontrollable tears.

'See now,' he said; 'see, I have stopped.' He laid his head upon his mother's knee, and presently grew calmer under the caressing touch of her hand. A sob shook him from time to time. Vague recollections of the distant griefs of his boyhood passed before his spirit. He heard again the twittering of the swallows, the sharp whirr of a knife-grinder's wheel, voices in the street, familiar sounds heard in the far-off afternoons, sounds that made his heart faint within him now. The crisis had passed, and the calm of reaction was falling upon him when Ippolita's image rose before him and stirred up the tumult once more, till with a shuddering sigh he dropped his head on his mother's knee.

'What a sigh!' she murmured, bending over him.

He smiled faintly without opening his eyes, but a feeling of utter prostration overcame him, a forlorn sense of weariness, a desperate longing to give up the never-ending, hopeless warfare. The desire to live ebbed further and further from him, as heat slowly deserts a corpse. Nothing remained of all his recent emotion; his mother became a stranger to him once more. What could he do for her? Could he save her—restore her peace of mind—bring back her lost health and happiness? Surely the ruin wrought in her was irreparable—

her life embittered beyond power of redress. His mother could no longer be to him a haven of refuge as in the days gone by. She could neither understand, console, nor heal him. Their minds were too diverse, their lives lay too far apart. She could offer him nothing but the tragic spectacle of her own wretched fate.

He rose, kissed her, and went up to his own room, and out on to the balcony. La Majella was all rosy red, looking enormous against a background of blue-green sky. The shrill cries of the swallows, turning and darting hither and thither, deafened him. He went in and lay down on his bed.

'I am a living, breathing creature,' he thought, as he lay there. 'Granted—but what is my life, after all—to what forces is it obedient?—under the dominion of what laws? I do not belong to myself—my one end and aim is to escape from myself. I am like a man condemned to stand upon an oscillating and perilous surface who perpetually feels the ground give way beneath his feet. I live in a state of continual anxiety, without knowing exactly what it is I fear. Is it the fear of the fugitive who feels himself pursued, or that of the runner who can never attain his goal? Perhaps something of both.'

The swallows passed and repassed the window in bands, like flights of black arrows.

'What do I lack? What is this defect in my moral nature? What is the cause of my impotence? I have the most burning desire to live, to bring all my powers into rhythmical subordination, to feel myself a complete and harmonious whole. Instead of which I die daily; each day a part of my life slips from me through countless invisible fissures; I am like a half-filled vessel which assumes a different shape with every movement of the liquid within. All my strength only enables me to carry with fatigue a few grains of sand which my imagination exaggerates to the size of rocks. Every thought I have is made barren by the perpetual conflict going on in my mind. What is it that is wanting in me? Who then controls that part of my consciousness which is for ever

eluding me, but which, nevertheless, I feel instinctively is indispensable to my existence. Or is that part of me already dead—and death alone can restore it to me? That is the true solution of the mystery—death attracts me. . . .’

The bells of Santa Maria Maggiore rang for Vespers. It brought to his mind the funeral cortège—the coffin, the masked bearers, and the ragged, dejected children catching the waxen tears in their hands, their eyes intent upon the moving candles.

He could not forget those children. Later on, writing to Ippolita, he dwelt at some length upon the allegory which his mind, always greedy of new impressions, had gathered dimly from the scene. ‘One of the boys, a poor, sickly, jaundiced little creature, with a crutch under one arm, dragged himself along at the side of a sort of hooded giant, whose enormous fist grasped the candle brutally. I shall never forget those two—I see them now. Perhaps there is something in me which is like that child. My life is, mayhap, in the power of some mysterious and unknown being who grasps it with a hand of iron. I see it burn away, and I drag myself heavily after it, painfully catching the few drops that fall, and every drop burns my poor hand.’

III

A VASE of roses, fresh and dewy May roses, which Camilla, the youngest daughter, had gathered in the garden, stood on the table. Seated round the table were the father, mother, Diego—a younger son,—Alberto, Camilla’s *fiancé*, invited specially for that day, and the eldest daughter Cristina with her husband and child, a little flaxen-haired boy, pale and fragile as a half-opened lily.

Giorgio was seated between his mother and father.

Cristina’s husband, Don Bartolomeo Celaia, Baron di Palleaurea, was holding forth on municipal intrigue in a rasping voice. He was a man of about fifty, dry and angular, with a bald spot like a tonsure, and a clean-shaven face. The almost

insolent brusquerie of his gestures and manners generally formed a curious contrast to his ecclesiastical appearance.

'Is it conceivable that Cristina is happy—that she loves this man?' thought Giorgio while he watched him and listened. 'Cristina, dear creature, so affectionate, so pensive, whom I have so often seen moved to tears in some sudden outburst of tender emotion; that Cristina should be chained for life to such a man—dry, elderly, soured by the stupid bickerings of provincial politics! Nor can she even find comfort in her motherhood, she must be consumed by fear and anxiety for that little sick and listless child. Poor creature!'

He looked at his sister with eyes full of affectionate pity. Cristina smiled back at him across the roses, hanging her head a little to one side with a graceful movement which was habitual to her.

His eyes wandered to Diego at her side, and he thought: 'Would any one believe that they belonged to the same family? Cristina has inherited much of the maternal grace, she has our mother's eyes, and, more particularly, her ways and movements. But Diego——' He scrutinised his brother with that instinctive repugnance which every creature feels in the presence of another who differs from him absolutely and in every respect. Diego was eating voraciously, never lifting his eyes from his plate, wholly taken up with the business on hand. He was barely twenty, but thick-set and red-faced, and already showing signs of *embonpoint*. The small grey eyes under the low beetling brow showed no spark of intelligence; a tawny down covered his cheeks and his heavy jaws, and shadowed his thick, sensual mouth, the same down appearing on his hands, the dirty nails bearing witness to his contempt for the niceties of the toilet.

'What a brute!' thought Giorgio; 'is it to be wondered at that, in order to address the simplest remark to him or return his mere good-morning, I have to contend with loathing which is positively physical? He never looks me in the face when he speaks to me, and if by chance our eyes do meet, he instantly turns his away and blushes continually before me

without any reason. I would give anything to know what his real sentiments are regarding me. He does not love me, that is certain.'

By a natural process of transition, his thoughts and his attention passed to his father, the man of whom Diego was the heir. Fat, full-blooded, and powerful, a hot breath of fleshly vitality seemed to emanate from his whole person. His jaw was square, his mouth thick-lipped and domineering; there was a slight cast in his bloodshot eyes, and the nose was large and bulbous. His whole face bore the impress of a violent and harsh nature; every movement, every attitude, was over-strong, as if the muscles of the massive body were in continual revolt against the flesh which encumbered them. All this inspired his fastidious neighbour with a feeling akin to nausea. 'No, no, he was not like that ten, twelve years ago,' said Giorgio to himself. 'I remember him perfectly, he was not so. This brutality was latent and unsuspected, and must have developed itself slowly and by degrees. And I, I am the son of this man!'

He looked more closely at his father, and remarked that at the corners of his eyes he had a network of wrinkles, and under them violet pouches. He took note of the short neck, thick, red, and apoplectic, and that the moustache and hair showed traces of dye. The beginnings of old age in a man still full of carnal desires, the implacable operations of vice and time, the vain and clumsy artifices to hide the traces of time's blanching finger, the menace of a sudden death; all these things, so pitiable and disheartening, so paltry and yet so tragic and so human, filled the son's heart with profound emotion. A flood of compassion swelled up in him—pity even—for his father. 'Can I blame him? He too suffers. All that flesh—that mass of flesh which fills me with disgust and loathing, is inhabited by a soul. Who may say what anguish of mind, what weariness of spirit he may not have to fight against. One thing is certain: he has a frantic dread of death.' In a moment he had a vision of his father in the death-agony—felled to the ground by a stroke of apoplexy—

gasping—still alive, but livid ; speechless, unrecognisable, his eyes full of the horror of death ; then a second blow from the invisible club and he lay still, a piece of senseless clay. 'Would my mother mourn him?'

'You are eating and drinking nothing,' his mother was saying to him. 'You have scarcely touched anything. You do not feel well, perhaps?'

'No, mother,' he replied ; 'only I am not hungry this morning.'

The sound of something dragging over the floor made him turn round. It was the decrepit tortoise, and he remembered his aunt Gioconda's words : 'It limps like me—a kick from your father——'

As he watched it, his mother said, with the faintest gleam of a smile, 'It is the same age as you ; it was given to me just before you were born. It was quite tiny then with an almost transparent shell—it was like a toy. It has grown to that size since it has been in this house.'

She took a piece of apple peel and offered it to the tortoise, watching the poor beast for a moment as it slowly waved its wrinkled, serpent-like head from side to side, and then began peeling an orange for Giorgio as if in a reverie.

'She is *remembering*,' thought Giorgio, noticing his mother's far-away look. He divined the ineffable sadness that must sweep over her at the recollection of happier days now that she had lost all that made life bearable ; after all the insults, the disgrace that had been heaped upon her. 'She had *his* love then, she was young, perhaps did not know what it was to be in trouble ; how her heart must ache, what regrets, what despair must fill her soul !' The son shared in his mother's sufferings, calling up in his own heart the agonies she must have endured, till at last his eyes were dim with tears. He kept them back with a strong effort, and felt them fall softly, drop by drop, on to his secret heart. 'O mother ! if you only knew—— !'

He turned his head away, and saw Cristina smiling fondly at him across the roses.

Camilla's *fiancé* was observing: 'That shows conclusively that he does not know the code. When any one has the pretension to——' The baron evidently approved of the young lawyer's arguments, and backed him up by a running accompaniment of 'To be sure! Quite so!'

They were demolishing the mayor.

Alberto, who was seated beside his *fiancée*, was all shining and rosy like a wax figure with a little pointed beard, his hair parted in the middle—a few locks being carefully arranged on his forehead—and gold-rimmed eyeglasses. 'That is Camilla's ideal, I suppose,' thought Giorgio. 'They have loved each other for years, they believe in their future happiness, they have hoped and sighed for it long enough. Alberto must have led the poor thing on his arm through all the paths of romance common to lovers. Camilla is not strong—she is nervous and hysterical; she does nothing from morning till night but wear out her piano playing nocturnes. They will marry; what sort of fate will be theirs? Given an empty-headed, self-satisfied young man and a sentimental, vapourish girl in the narrow-minded surroundings of a provincial town——'

For a moment he followed in imagination the course of their mediocre existence, and his heart melted in pity for his sister. Physically she was not unlike him. She was tall and slender, with beautiful pale chestnut hair and light eyes that continually changed in colour, now green, now blue, now grey. A suspicion of powder on her cheeks made her look still paler. She wore two roses on her breast.

'Perhaps she is like me in more than outward appearance. Perhaps, unconsciously to herself she carries in her soul some of those dread germs which I have consciously allowed to develop so potently in me. Her heart is surely full of vague trouble and unsatisfied longing. She is ill, but cannot name her malady.'

At this moment his mother rose from the table, followed by the rest of the family, except the father and Don Bartolomeo, who remained behind to smoke and talk, which in

Giorgio's eyes made them appear more odious than before. Passing one arm affectionately round his mother's waist, and the other round Cristina, he drew them into an adjoining room, his heart swelling with tenderness and pity for them. At the first notes of Camilla's nocturne he said to Cristina—

‘Shall we go down into the garden?’

The mother remained behind with the engaged couple, while Giorgio and Cristina went out, taking the silent little boy with them.

At first they walked side by side without speaking; Giorgio had slipped his arm through that of his sister, as he had a way of doing with Ippolita. Presently Cristina stopped and looked about her. ‘Poor old neglected garden!’ she murmured. ‘What games we had here when we were little—do you remember?’ She turned to little Luca: ‘Run along, Lucchino, run and play about a little.’ But the child would not stir from her side, and only clasped her hand more tightly.

‘You see,’ she said with a sigh to her brother, ‘he is always like that. He never runs, nor plays, nor laughs. He is always clinging on to me. Nothing will persuade him to leave me; he is afraid of everything.’ But Giorgio, absorbed in thinking of his absent love, did not hear her.

The garden, lying half in shadow, half in sunshine, was surrounded by a wall, on the top of which fragments of broken glass flashed in the sunlight. A trellis ran along one side; at the other, ranged at equal distances, stood a row of cypress trees, tall, slender, and straight as candles, surmounted by a tuft of dark, almost black, foliage, sharpened like a lance head. At the southern end, that part of the garden that caught the most sun, some rows of orange trees were now in flower. The rest of the ground was overrun with roses, lilacs, and scented grasses. Here and there stood little myrtle bushes, planted at regular intervals, which had served as a border to flower-beds now disused. In one corner was a fine cherry tree, and in the middle a round pond full of stagnant water, on which water-weeds grew luxuriantly.

'Oh, do you remember,' said Cristina, 'the day you fell into the pond, and poor Uncle Demetrio pulled you out? What a fright we got! It was a miracle he ever got you out alive.'

At the name Demetrio Giorgio started. That was a beloved name, a name that always set his heart beating fast. He listened now to what his sister was saying. He gazed at the water on which some long-legged insects were rushing hither and thither. He felt a restless desire to speak of the dead uncle, to pour out all his recollections of him. But he restrained himself from that sense of pride which makes us keep a secret shut close in our hearts that we may enjoy it in solitude—a feeling that was akin to jealousy, lest his sister too should grow melting and tender over the memory of the dead. That memory was his exclusive right. He guarded it as his most precious possession, with a chastened and profound cult that never wavered. Demetrio had been his true father, his real and sole relative.

The man rose up before him again, so gentle, so meditative, the melancholy yet virile face, and the lock of white hair amongst the black falling over his forehead, which gave him so striking an appearance.

'And then, do you remember,' Cristina went on, 'the evening that you hid yourself and spent the whole night out of doors? How terrified we were that time, too! How we called you, and the tears we all shed!'

Giorgio smiled. He remembered that he had not hidden himself for fun, but out of cruel curiosity to see what they would do when they thought he was lost, and to make them weep for him. The evening was calm and damp, and he heard the voices calling him; he listened for every sound from the thoroughly alarmed house, and held his breath with terror and satisfaction when they passed his hiding-place in their search for him. After a time, having searched the garden in vain, he was left undisturbed in his corner. Presently, seeing the windows of the house light up and darken again in turn, as if agitated people were passing hurriedly through the rooms, he was seized with emotion, so poignant

as almost to bring tears to his eyes; he fell to pitying his family's distress and his own, as if he had been really lost; and yet, for all that, he persisted in remaining where he was. In time, the day broke, and the slow spread of the light in the immense silent space seemed to sweep the cobwebs of folly from his brain and awakened his remorse. He thought of his father and the punishment that awaited him with terror and despair, and the pond fascinated him; he felt himself draw towards the pale opaque water which reflected the sky—the water in which, a few months previously, he had so nearly met his death. Demetrio was absent he remembered.

'What a delicious smell, Giorgio!' cried Cristina. 'I am going to pick some flowers.' The air was heavy and languorous with the warm fragrance of the garden. Great sprays of lilac, orange-blossom, roses, thyme, basil, myrtle—all contributed to one delicious stream of perfume, as delicate as it was overpowering.

'Giorgio,' asked Cristina suddenly, 'why are you so thoughtful?'

The perfume had raised a tumult of emotion in him; all the passion of his love rose up in fierce desire for Ippolita, sweeping every other sentiment before it, while a thousand recollections of past delights made his senses reel.

Cristina smiled—hesitated—then: 'You are thinking—of her?' she asked.

'Well, yes—you know!' answered Giorgio, reddening suddenly under his sister's kind and indulgent gaze, and remembering that he had spoken to her of Ippolita in the autumn, last September, when he was staying with her at the seaside.

Still smiling and hesitating, Cristina asked again: 'And you still—care for her—just as much?'

'Just as much.'

They said no more, but walked on towards the orange grove, each perturbed in their different ways; Giorgio's regrets increased by the confidence made to his sister, and Cristina feeling many a buried longing revive as she thought of this

unknown woman whom her brother adored. They turned and looked at each other with a smile that went far to soften their pain.

'Dio! what flowers!' she exclaimed, hurrying her steps and beginning to pluck the orange-blossom, shaking the branches to bring down the smaller sprays. The blossoms showered down upon her head, her shoulders, her bosom—the whole ground was covered with the fragrant snow. She was charming in that attitude with uplifted arms, her oval face and slender white neck, her cheeks flushed with her exertions. Suddenly she paled, her arms dropped to her sides, and she swayed, as if overcome by giddiness.

'Cristina, what is it? Do you feel ill?' cried Giorgio in alarm, and catching her to prevent her falling.

She could not speak, but signed to him to take her away from the orange trees. Supported by her brother, she managed to take a few wavering steps, while Luca gazed at her with terror-stricken eyes. Presently she stood still, gave a deep sigh, and slowly came to herself again.

'Do not be frightened, Giorgio—it is nothing—I am not very strong just now, the scent was too much for me. There, it has passed—I feel better.'

'Would you like to go indoors?'

'No, I would rather stay here. Let us sit down.'

They seated themselves on an old stone bench by the trellis. The child sat solemn and absorbed, and Giorgio, to shake him out of his torpor, called: 'Lucchino!'

The child only drooped his heavy head upon his mother's knee. He was like a broken floweret, hardly capable of the effort of holding his head upright on his neck. His skin was so fine and transparent that every vein showed through like threads of blue silk; his hair so flaxen as to be almost white. His eyes were soft and liquid like a lamb's, light blue, under long, pale lashes. The poor mother petted him, pressing her lips together to keep back the tears, but two big drops gathered and ran down her cheeks.

'O Cristina!'

Her brother's tone of affection only increased her emotion, and her tears flowed fast.

'See, Giorgio, I have never put forward any claims, I have always accepted everything, been resigned to everything; I have never complained, never rebelled. You know that, Georgia. But to have this—this added—not even to find a little compensation in my child——'

The hopeless tears choked her voice. 'You see—you see what he is. He does not talk, he never laughs, he never plays or does any of those things that other children do. What is the matter with him? I do not know. And he seems to be so fond of me—to adore me, he will not leave me for a moment—never. I could almost believe that he lived only by my breath. O Giorgio! if I were to describe to you some of those long, long days that seem as if they would never end! I sit at the window and work, and whenever I lift my eyes I find his fixed on me, gazing—gazing! It is one long agony—a martyrdom. I feel as if my heart's blood were trickling away slowly, drop by drop.' She broke down, her voice stifled by sobs.

'If only,' she went on presently, wiping away her tears, 'if only the child I am expecting might at least be healthy! I do not ask for beauty—oh, if God would but help me this time!'

Giorgio held her hand in his, and for a minute or two the brother and sister sat silently side by side, weighed down by the crushing sense of existence.

The garden stretched away before them, solitary and neglected. The cypresses rose up tall, straight, and motionless, pointing to high heaven like votive candles. The breeze that floated languidly through the rose-bushes close by had hardly strength to shake the faded petals from the flowers. The sound of the piano came fitfully from the house.

IV

'So the step they force me to take is inevitable! There is no way out of it. I shall be obliged to confront the brute.'

Giorgio looked forward to the moment with unreasoning terror, a prey to a deep-rooted, unconquerable repugnance at the thought of finding himself alone in a room with closed doors, face to face with that man.

As the days went past his fears increased, and with it his contempt for his own culpable inaction; he felt that his mother, his sister, all of these poor victims looked to him—the eldest born—for drastic measures, for protestation and protection. For what else had they called him here? Why else had he come? Nor did it seem possible that he should go without having performed this imperative duty. Of course, if the worst came to the worst, he could go off without giving them warning, and write home afterwards, justifying his conduct by some plausible excuse. In the extremity of his fear he had actually entertained this ignominious project, had thought out ways and means, arranged the minutest details, and had even followed out the consequences in his own mind. But in these imagined scenes his mother's sad, distraught face always rose to strike his heart with intolerable remorse. He loathed himself for his selfish weakness, and he sought, with childish fury, for some trace of inward energy, however small, which he might rouse and excite to oppose that far superior force in him which permitted him to lend himself to such despicable stratagems. But these fictitious upheavals did not last, and served him in no way towards forming a manly resolution. Then he would examine the situation calmly, and delude himself by the very rigour of his arguments. 'What can I do, after all!' he would say to himself; 'how is my intervention going to remedy the evil? Will this painful effort which my mother demands of me be really productive of any advantage, and if so, of what nature?' Not finding in himself the amount of energy needful for accomplishing the dreaded act, he had recourse to the opposite method, and strove to demonstrate to his own satisfaction the futility of any effort of his.

'What could possibly come of such an interview? Nothing, I am certain. It only depends on my father's humour at the

moment whether he will be violent or persuasive. If the former, I have no weapons against abuse and fury, and I should be equally helpless against a row of arguments to prove either his innocence of, or the necessity for, his sins. What is done cannot be undone. When vice once becomes so deeply rooted in a man's nature, it is irradicable. Now my father has reached the age when you can no longer root out vice nor cure what has become a habit. He has had this woman and these children for years. Is it within the range of probability that he will give them up for my admonitions? Have I a chance of convincing him that he ought to break these various bonds? I saw the woman yesterday. You have only to look at her to know that she will never relax her hold upon the man into whose flesh she has dug her talons. She will hold him fast till death—for that there is no remedy. And then there are those children and their claims. In any case, would a reconciliation be possible between my father and mother after all that has occurred? Never! Therefore any effort of mine would be fruitless. And after—— The material question of waste and neglect remains to be considered. How could I attend to that, seeing that I live so far from home? It would require a ceaseless vigilance which Diego alone could exercise. I must speak to Diego—I must consult with him. After all, at the present moment the only really urgent matter regards Camilla's marriage portion. The fact is, it is Alberto who makes the most fuss about it, and he is really the most annoying of the party to me. Perhaps it will not be so difficult to come to some arrangement with him.'

His idea was to contribute considerably towards his sister's marriage portion, for, having inherited his uncle's entire fortune, he was rich, and could well afford to do it. This generous project raised him in his own estimation. He felt himself relieved of all further painful responsibility by the pecuniary sacrifice which he was prepared to make, and as he went towards his mother's apartments, he felt much easier in his mind, lighter hearted, less distressed. Besides which, he had learned that morning that his father had returned to the

country villa where he usually lived, in order to enjoy more freedom ; and it relieved Giorgio's mind immensely to know that at that evening's meal one particular chair would be empty.

'Ah, Giorgio! you come in the nick of time!' exclaimed his mother as he entered. The tone of her voice struck him motionless where he stood, and he stared helplessly at his mother's face, all disfigured and unrecognisable from passion. He looked at Diego, he looked at Camilla standing sullen and silent, but neither of them offered an explanation.

'What has happened?' faltered Giorgio, turning to his brother, his attention arrested by the singularly malevolent expression which he now noticed for the first time on the young man's face.

'The silver-chest is missing,' Diego mumbled, frowning, and without raising his eyes; 'and they want to make out that I have made away with it.'

A torrent of angry words burst from the wretched mother's lips. 'Oh, you—yes, you; you are on your father's side—you are hand in glove with him. Oh, what villainy! It has come to this—to this—that the child I have nursed at my breast is against me! But you are the only one like him—thank God for that—the only one—I thank God for ever for that blessing! There was only one like him—only one!'

She turned to Giorgio, who still stood in the doorway paralysed, dumbfounded. Her chin trembled spasmodically; she was so convulsed with anger that from one instant to another he expected to see her fall senseless to the ground.

'Do you realise now what sort of life we lead here? Do you see it now? Every day brings some fresh disgrace with it; each day I must take up the fight anew to save this unhappy house from being plundered and sacked. Every day—without one moment's respite! Will you believe now that, if he could, your father would take the beds from under us and the very bread out of our mouths? But he will yet—you will see—it will come to that yet.'

And so she went on with panting breath, sobs choking her

utterance at every pause, with bursts of almost savage hatred in her voice, almost incredible in one so fragile in appearance. The man had no reticence, no decency; he stuck at nothing in order to get money. He had lost his senses, had gone clean out of his mind, had ruined the property, cut down the trees, sold the stock blindly to any one—at any price. And now he had begun to strip the house in which his children were born. For a long time he had cast longing eyes on the silver, the family heirlooms, always jealously guarded as a relic of the ancient grandeur of the Aurispas, and preserved intact till this day. All her efforts to hide it from him had been in vain. Diego had joined with his father, and the two together had succeeded in eluding every precaution, and had carried it off to pour it into God knows what hands.

‘Are you not ashamed,’ she continued, turning to Diego, who had the greatest difficulty in restraining a violent outburst of temper, ‘are you not ashamed to side with your father against me? I who have never refused you anything you asked for, who have always done what you wanted; and yet you know—you know perfectly well where the money goes to, and you are not ashamed! You have not a word to say—you do not answer me. There is your brother—look—now tell me where the chest is—tell me—I will know.’

‘I have told you already that I know nothing about it; I never took the chest, I have not even seen it. Do you understand me?’ Diego burst out brutally, unable to contain himself any longer, the furious blood rushing to his face and making him more than ever like his absent father.

The mother, turning pale as death, looked at Giorgio, and seemed to communicate her pallor to him by that look.

‘Diego!’ cried the elder brother, seized with an uncontrollable trembling, ‘Diego, leave the room!’

‘I shall go when I choose,’ answered Diego, with an insolent shrug of the shoulders, and avoiding his brother’s eye.

At that moment Giorgio was seized with one of those sudden frenzies of exasperation which in feeble and irresolute

men rise to such a pitch of vehemence as to make them incapable of translating their feelings into action, but send flashes of crime quivering through their imaginations. That hatred between brothers, fiercer than any other, which since the beginning of time has ever lain dormant in human nature, ready to burst forth on the smallest provocation; that inexplicable hostility which is latent in all the males of one blood, in spite of the bonds of affection which custom and the unity of a common home may have woven about them; the horror which ever accompanies the execution or even the thought of a crime, and is perhaps that inherited instinct of law, so deeply graven in the Christian conscience—all these feelings together surged in giddy confusion through Giorgio's mind, and made his hands tingle with an aggressive impulse. Diego's appearance alone, the thick-set, full-blooded body, the tawny red head and bull neck, the evident muscular superiority, the insult to his authority as elder brother, all contributed to increase his fury. He wished ardently for some instantaneous means of dominating, of subjugating, of crushing this brute without resistance or struggle. Instinctively he looked at his brother's hands—those broad, powerful hands, covered with a tawny down which had already awakened in him such repulsion at dinner, while occupied in ministering to his voracious mouth.

'Go—go this instant,' he repeated, in a ringing, imperious voice, 'or beg your mother's pardon on the spot'; and he advanced towards Diego with outstretched hand, as if to take him by the arm.

'I will take no orders from you!' cried Diego, looking his brother full in the face at last, his venomous little grey eyes under the low forehead revealing all the aversion he had stored up so long against him.

'Ah, Diego, take care!'

'I am not in the least afraid of you!'

'Take care, I say!'

'And who are you, I should like to know, and what are you doing here?' retorted Diego, beside himself with passion.

‘You have no right to a word in the matter. You are an outsider—I don’t take you into consideration. What have you ever done for any one up till now? Nothing! You have only looked after your own pleasures and your own interests, always. You have been petted and spoiled and worshipped all your life—what more do you want now? Stay you in Rome and squander your fortune in your own way, but do not mix yourself in matters which do not concern you!’

At last he had given vent to all his rancour, his envy, his hatred and malice against his brother, the favourite of fortune who lived at ease in the great city a life of unknown pleasures, as far removed from his family as a being of another race, in the enjoyment of a thousand privileges.

‘Stop, be silent!’ and the mother, beside herself, flung herself between them, and struck Diego across the mouth.

‘Go, not another word, go away from here, go to your father! I do not want ever to hear you or see you again!’

Diego hesitated a moment, shaken with rage, only waiting for a movement from his brother to throw himself upon him.

‘Go!’ repeated his mother, at her last gasp, and she sank into Camilla’s arms, outstretched to receive her.

At that he went, livid with passion and muttering words which Giorgio could not catch. They heard his heavy footsteps die away down the long line of dismal rooms where the daylight was already beginning to fade.

It was a rainy evening. Stretched upon his bed, Giorgio felt physically too bruised and broken almost to think. His thoughts floated, vague and incoherent, but the most trifling sensations irritated him, and sufficed to increase his deep dejection—a voice now and then in the street, the ticking of a clock on the wall, the tinkle of a distant bell, the stamping of a horse, a whistle, the bang of a closing door. He felt himself isolated, cut off from the rest of the world, separated from his former

life by an abyss of incalculable time. Vaguely, mistily, he saw once more the little gesture with which Ippolita drew the black veil over his last kiss; again he saw the child with the crutch catching the tears of wax. 'There is nothing left for me but to die,' he thought. Without any definite cause his mental suffering suddenly grew insupportable. His heart beat to suffocation as in a nightmare. He threw himself from his bed and paced the room giddy, half unconscious, unable to support the weight of his anguish. His footsteps seemed to echo through his brain.

'Who is there? Some one called me!' he had the sound of a voice in his ears. He listened but heard nothing. He opened the door and went out into the passage. All was silent, only his aunt's door was open and a light burning in the room. A strange fear took hold upon him, a sort of panic, lest that aged corpselike face should suddenly appear in the doorway. A sudden thought struck him, What if she were dead—sitting in her chair, her chin sunk upon her breast—dead? This vision stood out with the distinctness of reality, it froze him with horror. He stood where he was, rooted to the spot, not daring to move a muscle, while his head seemed clasped in a ring of iron which expanded and contracted with the pulsations of his arteries. His nerves had the upper hand of him, forcing him to share their turmoil and excess.

The old lady coughed, causing him to start violently. He retreated softly to his room on tiptoe, lest any one should hear him.

'What has come over me this evening? I cannot stay alone in this room any longer—I must go downstairs.' But he foresaw, that after the hideous scene of the afternoon, it would be equally impossible to bear the sight of his mother's grief-stricken face. He must go out, he would go to Cristina, encouraged to make the visit by the recollection of the sweet and pensive hour passed in the garden with his gentle sister.

It was a wet evening; the streets were almost deserted, and the gas-lamps—few and far between—shed but a dim light.

From a closed bakehouse came the voices of bakers at their work and the smell of new bread. A guitar twanged from a wineshop accompanying the chorus of a country song. A band of vagrant dogs raced past and disappeared down a narrow lane. The clocks were striking the hour.

The movement in the open air gradually calmed his excited nerves, and emptied his mind of that fantastic vitality which had encumbered it. He was able to fix his attention once more on what he saw and heard. He stopped to listen to the guitar and to inhale the smell of the warm bread. A man slunk past in the shadow of the opposite houses whom he fancied he recognised as Diego. The encounter disturbed him somewhat, but roused no resentment in him. All his violence and aggressiveness had dropped from him. He could not help recalling certain of his brother's words. 'Was he not right, after all,' he thought. 'I never have exerted myself for any one else's benefit. I have always lived for myself alone. I am truly a stranger in my father's house. Very likely they all think the same of me. Did not my mother say to me, Do you realise now what sort of life we have to lead? Can you see it now for yourself? Alas, I might see her shed oceans of tears, I have not the strength to save her.'

Meanwhile he had reached the door of the Celaja palace. As he crossed the courtyard, he raised his eyes to the lofty windows—not a light was visible in one of them; there was a smell of rotting straw, a little fountain dripped in a shadowy angle of the wall, and under the portico a lamp flickered faintly in front of an image of the Virgin, protected by a grating and with a large bouquet of artificial roses at her feet. The steps of the great staircase were hollowed and polished in the middle from long use, like those leading to some ancient shrine. The spirit of melancholy brooded heavily over the ancient hereditary mansion to which Don Bartolomeo, already on the verge of old age, had brought his young wife and begotten himself an heir.

As he mounted the stair, Giorgio beheld in spirit that pensive young mother and her pale child—far away at the end

of a chimerical vista as if in some remote and hidden chamber to which he could not penetrate. For a moment he half thought of retracing his steps, and stopped perplexed in the middle of the great deserted staircase. He was in a curious and indefinable condition of mind; once more he had lost the sense of the reality of his surroundings, and fell a prey to that vague terror which had assailed him just now in the corridor at home, at the sight of that yawning doorway. Suddenly, however, he heard the sound of a voice—some one was apparently driving something away, and a lean grey dog, some wretched mongrel, driven no doubt by hunger to steal his way into the house, fled past him, while a servant appeared on the landing in hot pursuit.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Giorgio, visibly startled.

‘Nothing—nothing, signore! I was chasing that dog away; it is a street dog that manages to get into the house every evening, no one knows how, like a ghost.’ Combined with the servant’s words, this little episode had the effect of filling him with an unaccountable anxiety—a vague sense of impending evil which inspired his next question.

‘Is Lucchino well?’

‘Yes, signore, thank God!’

‘Is he asleep?’

‘No, signore, he is still awake.’

Preceded by the servant, he traversed the vast rooms, which appeared half empty, in spite of the furniture, old-fashioned in style, and arranged with symmetrical precision. There were no signs of habitation about them—the rooms might never have been opened before, and he remarked to himself that Cristina could not love this house, as she had failed to breathe the grace of her spirit into it. For the most part, it had remained exactly as the young wife had found it when she entered it on her wedding-day—exactly as it had been left by the last lady of the house of Celaja.

Cristina, who was alone, and just preparing to put her boy to bed, was delighted at her brother’s unexpected appearance.

‘O Giorgio! how nice of you to come!’ she exclaimed, in

a burst of sincere affection, throwing her arms round him and kissing him, and by her tender caresses warming her brother's desolate heart.

'Look, Lucchino, here is Uncle Giorgio! Haven't you got anything to say to him? Come and give him a kiss.'

A pale smile shone for a moment on the child's lips, and the shadow of his long lashes quivered on his pallid cheek as he bent his head. Giorgio lifted him up in his arms, and was profoundly affected by the fragility of the slight body in which the poor little heart beat so feebly. He felt almost afraid of crushing the feeble life by the mere pressure of his hands—a fear such as he had felt when, as a boy, he held some tiny fluttering bird in his hand.

'Light as a feather!' he said; and the emotion which he could not keep out of his voice did not escape his sister's notice.

He took the child on his knee and stroked his hair gently. 'Are you fond of me, Lucchino?' he asked, his heart filling with unwonted tenderness. He had an intense desire to make the poor child smile, to see his cheek flush, if only once, to see even the faintest tinge of red stain the diaphanous whiteness of his skin.

'What have you done to yourself here?' he asked, pointing to a finger tied up in a linen rag.

'He cut himself the other day,' said Cristina, who followed intently every movement of her brother; 'it is a mere scratch, but it will not heal.'

'Let me look at it, Lucchino,' said his uncle, impelled by a morbid curiosity, but smiling at the boy in order to call up an answering smile. 'I will blow upon it, and that will cure it.'

The child, taken by surprise, allowed his finger to be uncovered, Giorgio, under his sister's anxious eye, employing infinite precautions during the operation. The end of the rag stuck to the little wound, and he had not the heart to pull it off, but noticed a small white spot, like a drop of curdled milk, slowly ooze up from under its outer edge. His lips

quivered, he raised his eyes, and, looking at his sister, who was hanging on his every movement, saw her face contract with a spasm of grief, and felt instinctively that the poor creature's whole soul was concentrated at that moment on the palm of the little hand he held in his.

'It is not serious,' he said, forcing a smile, and proceeding to blow upon the place to satisfy the child, who was attentively awaiting the miracle. Then he rebandaged the finger carefully. He thought of the strange nervous fear which had assailed him on the deserted staircase, of the fugitive dog, of the servant's words, and the questions he himself had asked, urged on by his superstitious fears, of all his groundless agitation.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Cristina, anxious to break his reverie.

'Oh, nothing!' Then, without reflecting, without any other motive than to rouse the attention of the sleepy child, he said, 'Do you know, I met a dog on the stairs.'

The child opened his eyes wide.

'A dog that comes every evening.'

'Oh yes!' said Cristina; 'Giovanni told me about it. But she stopped short, seeing by the child's terrified and dilated eyes that he was on the point of bursting into tears.

'No, no, it is nonsense!' she exclaimed, taking him from Giorgio's knee, and clasping him close. 'It is not true, Lucchino, uncle was only making fun.'

'No, it is not true, it is not true,' repeated Giorgio, rising, and quite disconcerted by the child's weeping, which was not the least like that of other children. The poor little thing seemed torn by its sobs.

'Come, come,' said his mother, in a coaxing voice, 'now Lucchino is going to bed.'

She passed into the adjoining room, still clasping and hushing her sobbing boy.

'Will you not come too, Giorgio?'

Giorgio looked on while she undressed the child, which she did slowly and with infinite precautions, as though afraid of

breaking him, every motion bringing into sad evidence the frailty of the poor little limbs already showing unmistakable signs of incurable rickets. The neck was long and slender as the stalk of a faded flower; the breast-bone, the ribs, the shoulder blades almost visible through the skin, and rendered more salient by the deep shadows in the hollows beneath them; the knee-joints were prominent and knotted, and when the child lifted his arms for his mother to put on his nightgown, Giorgio was filled with pity to see that it required an almost painful effort to accomplish this simple movement, and to throw off the mortal lassitude which threatened every moment to extinguish this feeble flame of life.

‘Kiss him,’ said Cristina, lifting him up to Giorgio before putting him in his bed. Then she took the child’s hands, and with the bandaged finger made the sign of the cross from his forehead to his breast and from the left to the right shoulder, after which she joined his hands and said ‘Amen.’

A funereal gravity lay over the whole scene. The child in his long white nightgown might have been a little corpse.

‘Go to sleep now, darling; go to sleep, we will stay beside you.’

The brother and sister, drawn together once more by the same sad thoughts, seated themselves silently, one on each side of the cot. There was an odour of drugs from a table near the bed covered with medicine-bottles; a fly buzzed loudly round the lamp and then alighted on the coverlet; a piece of furniture cracked in the silence.

‘He is asleep,’ said Giorgio softly.

They both absorbed themselves in contemplation of that slumber which suggested to them an image of death, from which they were unable to tear their thoughts away.

Some time passed thus, when suddenly the child gave a scream of terror, opened his eyes wide, and started from his pillow as if under the influence of some terrible dream.

‘Mama! Mama!’

‘What is it, darling—what is it?’

'Mama!'

'Yes, my pet; I am here, what is it?'

'Oh, drive it away—do drive it away!'

VI

AT supper (from which meal Diego had absented himself) did not Camilla seem to repeat the accusation, though in a veiled form, when she said, 'What the eye does not see the heart does not suffer'? And his mother's words, too—how quickly she had forgotten her tearful ending of their interview by the window—even his mother's words seemed to convey reproach on more than one occasion.

'They all judge me in the same way,' Giorgio mused bitterly; 'the fact is, they have never forgiven me the voluntary renunciation of my rights as first-born, nor my inheritance from my Uncle Demetrio. I ought to have stayed at home and kept a check upon my father and brother, and so defended the domestic happiness of the others. According to them, all this would never have happened if I had been there. Consequently it is I who am the real culprit, and this is the expiation of my crime.'

The nearer he approached to the villa to which his opponent had retreated, that opponent against whom he had been mercilessly forced to pit himself, the greater grew his sense of vexation and tyranny, and the indignation which is aroused by unjustifiable oppression. He looked upon himself as the victim of cruel and relentless people who were determined not to spare him one single pang. And the remembrance of his mother's words, the day they watched the funeral procession together, only increased his bitterness, and put a sharper point on his irony.

'No, Giorgio,' she had said, with streaming eyes; 'it is not fair that you should be annoyed or should suffer! I should have kept it to myself and not told you anything! Do not grieve so. I cannot bear to see your tears!' And yet, from that day forward he had not been spared one torment! The

little scene had failed to alter his mother's tactics towards him one whit. In the days that followed, she had not ceased to give vent to her angry feelings; she had constrained him to listen over again to old and new reproaches against his father, aggravated by the addition of a thousand detestable details; she had forced him, so to speak, to count upon her face the marks that suffering had made there; she had as good as said to him: Look at my eyes, all seared with weeping, the wrinkles deeply graven in my cheeks, my blanched hair—and could you but see my heart! To what end therefore had been the grand emotions of that day? It was evidently necessary that his mother should see his tears flow, before she could be moved to pity? Had she ceased to realise the cruelty of the sacrifice she imposed upon her son? Oh, how rare are those who can suffer in silence and offer themselves up with a smile!

Irritated and mortified by the violent scene in which he had so lately taken part, and already filled with horror and reluctance at the decisive step he was preparing to take, he went so far as to misjudge his mother, and reproach her for falling short of perfection in the way she faced her trials.

As he proceeded along the road—(he had refused the carriage in order to be at liberty to prolong the walk, or even at the last moment to retrace his steps, or wander away into the country)—as he proceeded, the horror grew upon him till it swallowed up every other sentiment and effaced every other thought. He began to picture the scene which would shortly take place, studying what manner he would adopt, preparing his opening sentences, and wandering off into improbable hypotheses. He searched among the most distant recollections of his childhood and youth, endeavouring to recall the successive attitudes of his mind in the past with regard to his father. But he could not succeed in fixing with precision the wavering lines of his filial affection, having no certain point to start from. He had never taken the trouble to examine with sincerity that corner of his conscience, preferring to leave it in undisturbed obscurity. He had never attempted to sound that instinctive

aversion, which, ever since he could remember, had been at the bottom of all his feelings when brought into direct contact with his father.

‘I do not suppose I ever cared for him,’ he thought ; and, in effect, he could recall no single instance of spontaneous confidence or effusive tenderness between them. On the other hand, through all his memories, back to his earliest childhood, there ran a thread of perpetual fear—fear of corporal punishment, of harsh words followed by blows. ‘No, I have never loved him.’ Demetrio had been his real father ; his true and only kinsman.

And he recalled the quiet, studious man with the melancholy but virile face, which was rendered more striking by the lock of white hair among the black that fell over his forehead.

As always happened, when he called up the image of the dead he felt a sudden relief, and the distressed thoughts that occupied his mind slipped away from him. The troubled waters grew calm, the bitterness was over, and a new sense of tranquil security took the place of his former repugnance. What had he to fear ? Why should he allow his imagination to exaggerate the trial that awaited him, especially since it was quite unavoidable. Once more, under the influence which his uncle exercised over him from the grave, he felt himself enveloped in a sort of isolating atmosphere—all earthly circumstances seemed to lose their significance and to have but a passing importance for him. It was the resignation of a man whom Fate obliges to undergo some ordeal, that he may attain to a deliverance of which his soul has already a clear and assured prevision.

This pause in his mental distress, this strange respite which he had obtained without any effort on his own part, and which caused him no surprise, opened his eyes to the grandeur of the wide and solitary landscape which surrounded him.

It was afternoon. The whole landscape was bathed in the effulgence of a pure and limpid sky, which seemed to spiritualise and permeate all material things. The divers forms of vegetation, distinct when seen close by, mingled and

melted into the distance, losing their outline by degrees, and tending to form one vast whole, animated throughout by one rhythmical breath. By gentle gradations the hills seemed to spread themselves out, and the bottom of the valley became a gulf, reflecting the sky in its tranquil bosom. Out of this gulf rose the massive form of the mountain, rearing into the limpid ether the solidity of its outlines, and illumined by the immaculate snow with almost supernatural splendour.

VII

At last he came in sight of the villa among the trees with its two wide terraces, surrounded by a stone balustrade and ornamented with terra-cotta vases in the form of busts of kings and queens, on whose heads sharp-pointed aloes had set living crowns.

The sight of these rough-hewn faces instantly brought back to Giorgio the days of his distant childhood, confused memories of country holidays, games, races, and the stories he had made for himself about these mute and motionless monarchs, deep into whose earthenware hearts the plants had struck their tenacious roots. He remembered that he had long nursed a tender partiality for one of the queens, whose flowing hair was composed of the thick foliage of a creeper and starred in spring with little golden flowers. His eyes sought eagerly for her, and recognising her presently in a corner, he smiled as he would on meeting an old friend, and for a moment his whole soul was drawn back to the irrevocable past with an emotion that was not devoid of pleasure.

But the sound of voices near the gate broke the charm. He came back with a rush to the realities of the present, and all his repugnance for the task before him returned in full strength.

It was very quiet—a canary in a cage at an open window sang shrilly. ‘My visit is unexpected,’ he thought to himself nervously; ‘what if that woman should be with him!’

Two children were playing just inside the gate, whom he at once guessed to be his illegitimate brothers. At his

approach they turned round and stared at him, surprised but unabashed, ruddy, wholesome, sturdy little fellows, their chubby cheeks glowing with health, their origin unmistakably stamped upon them. It was too much for him—he was seized with terror and dismay—his one idea was to hide—to beat an instant retreat. He raised his eyes to the open window, expecting fearfully to see his father's face appear between the curtains, or the odious woman of whose perfidy and cupidity he had heard so much.

‘Oh, signorino, are you here?’

It was the voice of a servant who had come out to meet him. At the same moment his father called to him from the window.

‘Giorgio, is that you? What a surprise!’

He pulled himself hastily together, forcing a smile and endeavouring to appear at his ease. He felt that already those artificial, almost ceremonious relations were re-established between him and his father, to which they had resorted for some time in order to disguise the embarrassment that always overcame them in each other's presence. Besides which he felt that his strength of will had utterly deserted him, and that he was incapable of stating frankly the true motive of this unexpected visit.

‘Will you not come up?’ asked his father from the window.

‘Yes—yes—I am coming!’

He pretended not to notice the two children, and went up the broad flight of steps leading to one of the terraces. His father came to meet him, and they embraced, the father displaying an ostentatiously affectionate manner.

‘So you made up your mind to come and see me at last!’

‘I wanted a walk, and my walk led me in this direction. It is a long time since I saw the place—nothing seems to be altered.’

He looked about him, examining the busts one by one with exaggerated interest.

‘You generally live here now, do you not?’ Giorgio asked, just for the sake of saying something, and to break one of

those uncomfortable silences which he foresaw would be frequent and long.

'Yes, I come here often now, and I stay as long as I can,' answered his father, in a tone of depression which rather surprised the son. 'I fancy the air does me good—since I have had this affection of the heart.'

'Your heart is affected?' Giorgio exclaimed, with sincere emotion and taken aback by the unexpected news. 'But how—since when? I never knew that—nobody ever said a word.'

Now that he looked his father in the face, in the bright hard light shed by the slanting afternoon sun, he fancied he detected the signs of the fatal disease. With a pang of compassion he marked the deep lines, the swollen and bloodshot eyes, the white hairs that bristled on the unshaven cheeks and chin—though the dyed moustache and hair were a dull greenish purple; the thick lips and laboured breath, the short, discoloured neck.

'Since when?' he repeated, unable to conceal his distress, and feeling his aversion ebbing away as he realised that this man lay under sentence of death.

'Does one ever know when a thing like this begins?' retorted his father, who, in face of this evidently sincere distress, exaggerated his sufferings in order to maintain and increase a commiseration from which he might possibly draw some advantage. 'It is one of those diseases that remain dormant for years, and then, some fine day, without a word of warning, they declare themselves, and then it is too late for remedies. One must just resign one's self to the inevitable—the blow may fall at any minute.'

While he spoke thus with trembling voice, he seemed to lose much of his heaviness and rude muscularity, to become older, feebler, more broken, as if by a sudden collapse of his whole person. And yet it was overdone, there was something artificial, theatrical about it which did not escape Giorgio's notice. Involuntarily it reminded the young man of those actors who have the power of changing their whole

face in a moment, in mid-scene, as if they put on and removed a mask, and he knew intuitively what would follow. Without doubt his father had guessed pretty accurately the reason for this sudden visit, and hoped to gain some advantage by this display of ill-health, and most certainly he had a definite object in view. But what? Not that he felt any indignation or anger, nor did he attempt to arrange any precautions against him in his own mind, or against the trap that was undoubtedly being prepared for him—on the contrary, the clearer his vision, the more callous he became. He simply let the comedy take its course, resigned to every change of scene.

‘Will you come in?’ asked his father.

‘Just as you like.’

‘Very well, we will go in; I have some papers I want to show you.’

His father went before him towards one of the rooms—that from which the canary’s song resounded through the whole villa. Giorgio followed, looking straight before him. He noticed that his father had altered his gait, walking with an affectation of great fatigue, and the thought of the degrading impostures of which he must shortly be both a witness and a victim filled him with mortification and sorrow. He felt the presence of the woman in the house, he was certain that she was hiding in some room, that she was listening and spying upon them. ‘What are these papers?’ he thought—‘what does he want to get out of me? Money, of course. He thinks to take me unawares.’ Certain bitter invectives of his mother echoed through his mind. He recalled certain almost incredible details he had learned from her. What am I to do? What answer can I give him?

The canary practised his liquid runs, the white curtains swelled like sails in a breeze, showing a vista of distant blue. The breeze rustled among the papers on the table, and in a crystal frame, serving as a letter-weight, Giorgio caught sight of an obscene photograph.

‘What a dreadful day it has been!’ murmured his father,

making believe to be suffering from violent palpitations, and letting himself drop heavily into a chair, where he lay back with closed eyes, breathing stertorously.

'You are in pain?' faltered Giorgio, not knowing how much of this suffering was real and how much pretence, nor exactly what manner to adopt.

'Yes—but it will pass directly. The slightest agitation, the least annoyance, brings it on again; I ought to keep very quiet, to rest, but instead of that——'

He had resumed his broken, complaining tone, which by some vague resemblance in voice reminded Giorgio of poor old Aunt Gioconda lamenting the want of her sweets. But now the pretence was really too glaring, too ignoble; and yet there was something so pitiable in the spectacle of a man reduced to such base expedients in order to satisfy his implacable vices, there was so much real misery in that shift face, that it seemed to Giorgio that of all the troubles of his past life none was in any way to compare with the hideous anguish of these moments.

'And instead?' he asked, as if to encourage his father to proceed and to put a limit to his own distress.

'Why, instead of that, everything has gone from bad to worse lately, one stroke of ill-luck after another. I have had heavy losses—three bad years in succession—disease in the vines—the cattle dying—the rents reduced by one-half, the taxes enormously increased. See here, here are the papers I wanted to show you.' He took a bundle from the table, spread them out before his son, and began a confused explanation of a number of most complicated matters relating apparently to ground-taxes which were some months overdue.

'They ought to be attended to at once if incalculable mischief is to be averted.' There had already been threats of sequestration—a forced sale might even be imminent. What was to be done in this momentary embarrassment, which, after all, was in no way his fault? The sum in question was a pretty large one—what was to be done?

Giorgio was silent, his eyes fixed upon the papers which his father was turning over with a swollen, puffy hand, its excessive pallor contrasting strangely with his flushed face. From time to time he ceased to hear the words, but his ear retained the monotonous sound of his father's voice as a background to the shrill song of the canary and the intermittent shouts of the children playing down in the garden. The curtains fluttered at the window as the breeze rose and fell in their folds. All these sounds and movements affected the silent visitor with a sense of inexpressible sadness as he sat gazing in a kind of stupor at the cramped, clerkly writings on the papers, and the puffy white hand all punctured with innumerable little lancet marks.

A scene out of his childhood rose with startling distinctness before him—his father seated near a window with a very grave face, his shirt sleeve pushed far up his arm, which he held over a basin of water; the water stained with blood which flowed from an opened vein, and beside him the surgeon watching the flow of blood and holding the bandage ready for application. One picture called up another; he saw the gleam of lancets in a green leather case, a maid carrying away the basin full of blood; he saw the arm in a black silk sling tied across the broad back.

'Are you listening to me?' asked his father, seeing him sunk in thought.

'Yes—yes—I am listening.'

The father probably expected a spontaneous offer on Giorgio's part. Disappointed in this, he paused for a moment, and then, concealing his annoyance, said, 'Bartolomeo could save me by giving me the sum'; he hesitated—an indefinable expression came over his face which his son interpreted as a last struggle between shame and the overmastering, almost desperate desire to attain his end at any cost.

'He would give me the money fast enough on a note of hand, but I think he would want your signature to it.'

The murder was out.

'Ah! my signature?' faltered Giorgio, upset, not so much by the request, as at the mention of his brother-in-law, whom his mother had already represented to him as a bird of ill omen, only too eager to devour the remnants of the house of Aurispa.

As he remained perplexed and uncertain as to the course he should pursue, his father, fearing a refusal, cast aside all reserve, and openly begged for what he wanted. That was the one and only way in which a forced sale was to be avoided—a calamity which would most certainly bring down all the rest of his creditors upon him. Inevitable ruin stared him in the face. Did his son wish to see him ruined? Did not he understand that in intervening in this matter he would only be working for his own interests in defending the inheritance which must very soon fall to himself and his brother?

'Oh, you will not have to wait long—it may happen from one day to another—perhaps to-morrow.' He began again on the subject of his fatal malady; the constant peril which threatened him, the worries and anxieties which were hastening his end.

Distracted by that insufferable voice and face, and yet restrained by the thought of his other tormentors—those who had forced him to come here and were even now impatiently awaiting him to render an account of his actions—Giorgio faltered: 'But this money—can I trust you to use it for the purpose you say?'

'Ah, you too—you too!' cried his father, only half disguising an outburst of passion under an appearance of outraged paternal feeling. 'So they have taken the trouble to retail to you too the vile reports they spread everywhere about me. I am a monster of infamy—I have committed every crime—I am capable of every villainy! And you believed it all? But why do I ask? Why should they all hate me so in that house? Why should they wish me dead? Oh, you have no conception how your mother hates me! If you went back to her this moment, and told her you had left me at my last gasp,

she would throw her arms round you and cry, Thank God for that! Oh, you do not know!’

In spite of himself the real man appeared at last in all his savage brutality; and, at the sight, the son had a fresh access of his original aversion, so sudden, so violent, that without giving himself time for reflection, possessed by the one desire to silence his father and deliver himself from the horror of his presence, he struck in convulsively—

‘No, no, I know nothing about it; only say what you want me to do—what must I sign?’ Sick at heart, he rose from his chair and went over to the window, then turned and looked at his father. He was searching with trembling, impatient hands for something in a drawer which he placed upon the table. It was a blank bill of exchange.

‘There, it will do if you put your signature down there’; and with his enormous first finger, on which the flattened nail almost disappeared in the surrounding flesh, he pointed out the spot.

Without sitting down, only half conscious of what he was doing, Giorgio seized a pen and signed rapidly. His one thought was to get out of this room, out into the open air, as far away as possible, alone. But when he saw his father take up the paper, examine the signature, dry it with a pinch of sand, and lock it away carefully in the drawer again; when he observed in his every action the ill-disguised, ignoble joy of the man, who has accomplished a successful piece of swindling, when he realised that he had allowed himself to be thoroughly taken in, and thought of the cross-examination that awaited him at home, then—then, at last, fruitless regret for what he had done so overwhelmed him, that he was within an ace of giving free rein to his extreme indignation, and standing up firmly to the scoundrel in defence of himself, of his family, and the violated rights of his mother and sister.

Ah, then, it was true, all that his mother had said was true! This man had not a trace of reticence or decency left. He recoiled from nothing when it was a question of getting

money. And once again he felt the presence in the house of the rapacious, insatiable woman, who was surely concealed in some room close by, listening and spying upon him, waiting for her share of the plunder.

'Promise me,' he said, unable to repress a shudder, 'promise me that you will not use the money—for any other purpose.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' replied his father, taking no pains to conceal his irritation at this persistence, and changing his manner completely, now that he had attained his object and was no longer obliged to play the humble suppliant.

'Take care, then, for I shall be sure to find it out,' Giorgio added, who had turned very pale, making a great effort to control his indignation, now that the man showed himself more and more clearly in his true and odious colours, and now that he fully realised the consequences of the rash act he had committed.

'Take care; I refuse to be your accomplice against my mother.'

'What do you mean by that?' cried his father, with a great show of wounded susceptibility at this suspicion, and raising his voice suddenly to intimidate Giorgio, who, by a supreme effort, had forced himself to look his father boldly in the face. 'What do you mean by that? When will that viper of a mother of yours leave off spitting her venom at me? Does she want to drive me to close her mouth for ever? Very well; I shall do it one of these days. What a woman! For fifteen years—yes—fifteen long years, she has not left me a moment's peace. She has poisoned my life, she has killed me by inches, and if I am a ruined man now it is her fault, and hers alone. Do you hear? hers alone!'

'Stop!' cried Giorgio, beside himself with rage, pale as death, trembling in every limb. 'Silence! Do not dare to speak her name; you are not fit to kiss her feet. I came here to remind you of that, and I have allowed myself to be taken in by a farce; I have fallen into the trap you set for me. All you wanted was to get something out of me for your

harlot, and you have succeeded—more shame to me ; and, after that, you dare to abuse my mother !’

His voice broke, the words stuck in his throat, a mist came before his eyes, and his knees shook beneath him ; he had barely strength to keep upon his feet. ‘I am going now—you may do as you please—I am no longer any son of yours. I will never see you or have anything to do with you again. I shall take my mother and carry her as far from you as possible. Good-bye.’

He staggered from the room, a veil of darkness before his eyes. Before he reached the terrace, he heard the rustle of skirts and a door closed sharply, as if behind some one who retreated in haste to escape detection. When, at last, he was in the open air and outside the gates of the house, he felt a wild desire to weep, to cry aloud, to rush madly through the fields and dash his head against a rock or throw himself over some precipice—anything—anything to make an end of it all. Every nerve was strung to breaking point, and he thought with terror, which the fast falling shades of the dying day rendered more acute, ‘Where am I to go to ? How am I to go back *there* to-night ?’ His home seemed to retreat into limitless distance, the length of the road to be insuperable—everything inadmissible which did not tend to the immediate relief of his intolerable suffering.

VIII

THE next morning, awakening out of a troubled slumber, he retained but a confused memory of the occurrences of the day before. The tragic fall of day in the deserted Campagna ; the solemn sound of the Angelus, which, by some hallucination, seemed interminably prolonged in his ear ; the anguish that had gripped him at sight of the house with its lighted windows and the shadows moving across them ; the feverish excitement with which he answered his mother’s and his sister’s questions, exaggerating both the violence of his own invectives and the horrid details of the altercation generally ; the half-delirious

desire to talk excessively, to intersperse the recital of real fact with the imagery of his own incoherent fancies, the bursts of contempt and tenderness with which his mother interrupted him, as he described in turn the brutal attitude of his father and his own energetic opposition ; then his sudden hoarseness, the intolerable throbbing of his temples, the violent rigors that seized him the moment he lay down in bed, the hideous visions of the night, all returned confusedly to his mind, and increased the overpowering lassitude, from which he desired to pass to more complete annihilation—the utter insensibility of death.

The absolute necessity of death in some form weighed upon him with unabated force, but the idea that, in order to put his design into execution, he must inevitably shake off his lassitude, must go through a series of fatiguing actions, was more than he could bear. Where should he kill himself? By what means? Here in the house? This very day? By fire-arms or poison? He could not form any definite plan. His lethargy and the bitter taste in his mouth inclined him to a narcotic ; and, without waiting to think of the best practical means for obtaining the necessary dose, he began vaguely picturing the effects. By slow degrees the pictures multiplied, detached themselves, grew more distinct, and finally grouped themselves into visible scenes. His imagination was less occupied with personal sensations connected with his painful death, than with the circumstances which should bring the catastrophe to his mother's and brother's knowledge. He endeavoured to imagine their attitudes, their words, their gestures, all the manifestations of their grief. Little by little his imaginative curiosity extended itself to all the survivors, not only his nearest relations, but the whole family circle—to his friends, to Ippolita—that Ippolita who seemed so far away as to be almost a stranger.

'Giorgio !' It was his mother's voice as she knocked at the door.

'Is that you, mother? Come in !' She came in, approached the bed with tender solicitude, leaned over him, and laying a

hand on his forehead, said, 'How are you now? Do you feel better?'

'A little; my head swims a little still. I have a bitter taste in my mouth; I should like something to drink.'

'Camilla shall bring you a cup of milk. Would you like me to open the shutters a little more?'

'If you like, mother.' He spoke irritably; his mother's presence accentuated the self-pity which the imaginary picture, so soon to be realised, of his mourning family had called up in him. In fancy he identified the real circumstance of his mother opening the shutters with the imagined one which should lead to the disclosure of the sad event, and his eyes filled with commiseration for himself and the unhappy woman for whom he was preparing so cruel a shock. The tragic scene rose with startling clearness before him. His mother would turn round after letting in the light, would call him once more; she would approach the bed a second time in fear and trembling, would touch him, shake him, find that he was cold and still and rigid, and with a cry she would fall across him fainting—dead, perhaps—a shock like that might kill her on the spot. His inward commotion waxed stronger; the moment assumed for him the solemn aspect of something irretrievable and final, and his mother's look, her every word and gesture, such a peculiar significance and value, that he watched her with almost anxious attention. Shaken suddenly out of his lethargy, all his senses seemed to become abnormally acute—a manifestation of a familiar phenomenon which had often excited his wonder and interest. It was the instantaneous transition from one state of consciousness to another, the same difference existing between the previous and the later state as between sleeping and waking. It reminded him of the theatre when the footlights are suddenly turned up to their full height.

Thus, as on the day they watched the funeral, the son suddenly opened his eyes upon his mother, and saw her with a strange lucidity of vision. He felt that the life of this woman drew near and clung adherent to his own; he knew, by the mysterious sympathy of blood, the sad fate that

awaited them both. When his mother came over and seated herself beside his pillow, he raised himself on his elbow and clasped her hand, striving to hide his trouble and pain by a smile. Under the pretext of examining a gem in one of her rings, he gazed long at the slender, fragile, eminently expressive hand, whose contact affected him like nothing else in the world. 'When I am dead,' he mused, still wrapped in the sombre images he had evoked just now, 'when I am dead and she touches my icy hand——' and he shuddered at the recollection of his own repulsion on touching a corpse.

'What is the matter?' asked his mother.

'Nothing—merely a nervous shiver.'

'Ah, I am sure you are not well!' she went on, shaking her head. 'What do you feel like?'

'I don't feel anything, beyond that I am a little shaken—naturally.'

But the strained look on her son's face did not escape the mother's eye. 'Oh, how I regret having sent you to that place!' she exclaimed. 'How wrong I was to let you go!'

'Do not say that, mother; sooner or later it had to be done.'

At the same moment, and without any confusion this time, he lived over again that hateful hour, heard his father's voice and saw his gestures, heard his own voice uttering words more violent than he would ever have believed possible. He felt as if some stranger had performed those actions and pronounced those words, and yet, at the bottom of his heart, he felt a vague remorse, an instinctive consciousness of having overstepped the bounds, of having committed an unpardonable transgression, of having trodden underfoot something human and sacred. Why had he departed so far from that resolute calm which the image of Demetrio had inspired in him when it rose before him in the midst of the wide and mute Campagna? Why had he not persisted in regarding the baseness and ignominy of this man only with the far-seeing eye of pity? He bore that man's blood in his veins, why not also the latent germs of his vices? No doubt, if he continued to live he risked falling into the same abject state. Life was but a

seething mass of impurity. He felt in himself the workings of a thousand obscure and indestructible forces, the successive and irresistible expansion of which had gone to make up his past existence, and would go on to form his future if, as it happened, he were not obliged, at this point, to obey one of these forces by putting an end to it all by some extreme measure.

After all, why regret what I did yesterday? Could I have prevented it?

'Yes, it had to be done,' he repeated, as if to himself, with new significance. And he waited, calm and attentive, for the further developments in the short span of life left to him.

IX

WHEN his mother and sister had left him, he remained for some moments longer in bed from sheer physical antipathy to any action whatsoever. He felt that to rise and dress would demand an almost superhuman effort, that he was too fatigued even to alter his recumbent position, when in one short hour perhaps he would be outstretched in everlasting repose. He thought again of the narcotic: 'Close your eyes and wait for sleep.' The virginal freshness of the May morning, the limpid sky reflected in the window-panes, the broad band of sunshine stretching across the floor, the voices and sounds from the street—all these varied signs of life, which seemed to be rushing in upon him, bent on dragging him back to life, only filled him with terror, not unmingled with resentment. He returned to the vision of his mother opening the shutters, and Camilla standing at the foot of his bed. Once again he heard their words which always related to the one man—his father. One cruel exclamation of his mother's remained particularly in his memory, and he associated it with the look he had seen on his father's face on the terrace in the fierce glare of the afternoon sun, when he fancied he discovered the signs of mortal disease upon it.

'Would it were true!' she had exclaimed in bitter earnest to him and Camilla—'would to Heaven it were true!' And

this was to be the last impression he was to take with him into the next world of the being who had once been his ideal of all that was tender and compassionate.

He made an energetic movement, and threw himself out of bed, with the fixed determination of proceeding to definite action. 'It shall be done by this evening—but where?' He thought of Demetrio's closed rooms. He had no fixed plan as yet, but he was inwardly convinced that during the next few hours the *manner* of his death would be suggested to him suddenly by some secret voice which he must obey.

While proceeding with his toilet, he was haunted by the idea of preparing his body for burial—a grim form of vanity which appears sometimes in the condemned or in suicides. He regretted, too, that he should have to die in this obscure little provincial town, far from his friends, who would perhaps remain long in ignorance of his death. If it could have happened in Rome, in the great city where he was so well known, his friends would have mourned him suitably, would doubtless have surrounded the mysterious tragedy with a halo of poetry. And once more, he set himself to imagine the scenes that would follow his demise—his attitude on the bed, the profound emotion of these young and fraternal spirits at the aspect of the corpse in all its austere repose, the colloquies during the death vigil by the solemn light of the tapers, the coffin covered with wreaths and followed by a crowd of silent young men, the farewell words at the grave pronounced by a poet—by Stefano Gondi: 'He died because he could not bring his life into unison with his dreams'; and then the grief, the despair—the madness of Ippolita.

Ippolita! Where was she? what was she thinking? what was she doing?

'Ah!' he thought, 'my presentiment was right!' and he recalled the gesture with which she had drawn a black veil over his last kiss, he reviewed in spirit all those last little *final* acts.

And yet, there was one thing he could not explain satisfactorily—his entire acquiescence in a deed which necessarily

involved the definite renunciation of this woman, once the object of all his dreams, of all his adoration. Why, after the transports and fever of the early days had hope abandoned him little by little—why had he come to the desolating certainty that no effort he might make would succeed in resuscitating that great and precious thing that was so dead, so incredibly remote: their love? Why had the past fallen away from him so completely that during these last days, in the midst of these fresh tortures, he had rarely felt it stir his consciousness?

Ippolita! Where was she? what was she doing? On what scenes did her eyes rest? Whose words, whose presence was affecting her? How came it, that during the last fortnight, she had not found time to communicate with him more intimately than by four or five telegrams, each despatched from a different place?

‘Perhaps she has already succumbed to the influence of some other man—that brother-in-law, for instance, of whom she was for ever talking. . . .’ This horrible idea, the outcome of his old habit of reproach and suspicion, took hold of him as fiercely as in the gloomiest hours of the past. A flood of bitter memories swept over him, and leaning on the same balcony, where on the first evening he had invoked the name of the beloved, in one single moment of time he lived over again all the doubts and anguish of two years.

X

THE desire to steep himself more profoundly in the mystery into which he was about to enter, led Giorgio to revisit the deserted apartments in which Demetrio had passed his last moments.

With his uncle’s fortune, he had also inherited these rooms, but had preserved them religiously intact, as he would a shrine. They were situated in the upper story of the house, looking over the garden, facing south.

He took the key and mounted the stairs cautiously, un-

desirous of being questioned as to his destination. But in traversing the corridor, he must of necessity pass Aunt Gioconda's door. Hoping to pass unobserved, he went on tiptoe, holding his breath. He heard the old lady cough, and hurried on, thinking that the noise would cover the sound of his footsteps.

'Who is that?' asked a hoarse voice from within.

'It is I, Aunt Gioconda.'

'Ah, you, Giorgio? Come in, come in!' She appeared on the threshold, her yellow face cadaverous in the shadow, examining her nephew with that peculiar scrutiny which goes to the hands first instead of the face, as if to see what they bring.

'I am going into the rooms—over there,' said Giorgio, sickened by the revolting odour of humanity that streamed from the room, and showing clearly that he did not wish to be stopped. 'Addio, aunt, I must air the rooms a little.'

And he went on across the corridor to the other door; but as he put the key in the lock, he heard the uneven footsteps of his aunt behind him.

His heart sank as he thought he might possibly find no means of ridding himself of her, and that the sacred silence of these rooms that teemed for him with fond and mournful memories, would perforce be broken by her half-witted babblings. Without a word, without even turning round, he opened the door and went in.

The first room was dark, the air moist and heavy, and impregnated with the smell peculiar to old libraries. A narrow line of light marked the window. Giorgio hesitated before opening it. Aunt Gioconda coughed somewhere in the gloom. He felt for the latch, and started nervously when his fingers came in contact with the cold iron. He opened the window and turned round. The furniture loomed vaguely through the green twilight that filtered through the shutters; he could distinguish the form of his aunt standing in the middle of the room, all bent and flaccid—she was chewing something. He pushed back the shutters on their creaking

hinges, and let in a flood of sunshine. The faded curtains fluttered languidly.

He stood there undecided; the presence of the old woman irritated and disturbed him, preventing him effectually from giving himself up wholly to his sentiments. His annoyance increased to such a pitch, that he dared not trust himself to speak, lest his voice should betray his mortification. He passed into the adjoining room and opened the window—into a third, and did the same. The light streamed in, the curtains fluttered languidly.

He would not go any further. The next room, a corner one, was the bedroom. That one he was determined to enter alone. He heard with disgust the dragging steps of his importunate relative following him; he seated himself and waited in obstinate silence.

She slowly crossed the threshold. Seeing Giorgio seated but speechless, she stood a moment puzzled, uncertain what to do. The fresh breeze blowing in at the window aggravated her cold, and she began coughing again, her hands pressed to her bosom—fat, greasy, white hands, with black-rimmed nails—her tongue trembling between her toothless gums.

The fit of coughing over, she drew from her pocket a dirty little screw of paper, from which she extracted a lozenge which she sucked, staring at her nephew meanwhile in a kind of stupor. Her eyes then wandered from Giorgio to the door of the fourth room. She made the sign of the cross; and, shambling across the room, seated herself in a chair close to Giorgio's side, and with her hands clasped on her stomach, her eyes cast down, she proceeded to recite a requiem.

'She is praying for her brother, for the soul of the *damned*,' thought Giorgio. That this woman should be the sister of Demetrio Aurispa, seemed to her nephew an inconceivable thing. Could the blood—so generous and so proud—that had stained the pillow in the next room, flowing from a brain already worn by the deepest intellectual researches—could it have a common source with the impoverished fluid which circulated in the veins of this poor old cretin? 'It is her

greediness, and that alone, which leads her to regret the liberal donor. To think that a prayer of gratitude should rise up from a worn-out stomach to the noblest of suicides! Life is indeed grotesque!

Suddenly Aunt Gioconda's cough began again.

'You had much better go away from here, Aunt Gioconda,' said Giorgio, no longer able to repress his impatience. 'The draught here is bad for you—you had much better return to your room. Come, get up—I will take you back.'

His aunt stared at him, taken aback by the unwonted sharpness of his tone. She rose and limped away. Out in the corridor, she once more made the sign of the cross, by way of exorcism. Giorgio closed and double locked the door after her.

At last he was free and alone with his invisible companion.

He stood still a moment, as if under some magnetic influence, penetrated through and through by the supernatural fascination exercised over him by the man who lay in his grave.

'For me he still exists,' thought Giorgio. 'From the day of his physical death I have never ceased to feel his spirit in me, and never, since the day of his death, have I felt so closely akin to him as to-day, nor had so vivid a perception of the intensity of his spirit. All that he gave out in his contact with others, his every word and deed; all the forms—both constant and variable—which distinguished his personality from that of other personalities, and made him a man apart from the rest of humanity—in short, everything that made his life so different from the ordinary run of lives now seems to me to be gathered up and concentrated in the ideal bond which unites him to me. He exists for me alone—freed from every other contact, communicating only with me. He exists still—purer and more intense than ever.'

He paced the room slowly. The silence was alive with mysterious little sounds. The fresh air, the morning heat, sent a thrill of life through the drowsy fibres of the furniture,

so unaccustomed to anything but darkness and closed windows. The breath of heaven set the dust eddying, and swelled the folds of the curtains. Myriads of atoms danced in a ray of sunshine. The smell of the books slowly gave place to the fragrance of the flowers.

The surrounding objects revived a multitude of memories in the survivor. Emanations from the past breathed from every object—they seemed almost to emit the essence of some spiritual fluid with which they had been impregnated.

‘Am I exciting my imagination?’ he asked himself, as the images succeeded one another in his mind with amazing rapidity, clear and vivid, instinct with some transcendent vitality. ‘These representations which I make in my own mind, are they free from any element of the supernatural—are they of the same substance as dreams? Am I only suffering from the agitation of my overstrung nerves?’ He remained perplexed, fascinated by the mystery of it all, trembling and terrified at finding himself on the borders of the undiscovered country.

The curtains waved softly to and fro and gave glimpses of a noble and tranquil landscape. The light whispers among the woodwork, the papers, the shutters continued. The third room, severe in its simplicity, looked musical memories through the mute instruments lying here and there. On a piano in whose cover the surrounding objects were reflected as in a mirror, lay a violin in its case. A sheet of music lying on a chair rose and fell with the breath of the breeze, as if in harmony with the curtains.

Giorgio took it up. It was a page out of a motet of Mendelssohn’s: *Domenica II. post Pascha*—Andante quasi allegretto. Surrexit pastor bonus. On a table a little further off, was a heap of music—scores for violin and piano, Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, Rode, Tartini, Viotti. Giorgio opened the violin-case and gazed at the delicate instrument, slumbering within on its bed of olive velvet, with its four strings intact. Seized with the desire to awaken it, he touched one of the strings, and evoked a shrill complaint which made the

whole case vibrate. It was an Andrea Guarneri, with the date 1680.

The figure of Demetrio rose before him, tall, slender, and slightly bent, his head thrown back, and the white lock falling over his forehead. The violin was in his hand. He passed his fingers through his hair, just above the ear, with a gesture peculiar to him, tuned the instrument, rubbed the bow with rosin, and attacked the sonata. The fingers that pressed the strings were thin, but firm and beautifully formed, and the play of muscle under the skin so visible as to be almost painful. The right hand drew the bow with a large and faultless gesture. Now and then he would press the instrument closer with his chin, his head bent forward, his eyes half closed, withdrawn into the inner sanctuary of his delight—anon he would draw himself up to his full height, gazing before him with illumined eyes, a fugitive smile upon his lips, his forehead extraordinarily pure.

Thus did the violinist reappear in Giorgio's memory. Hours, long past and gone, were lived over again, not in spirit only, but in substance and in truth. Those long hours of fond intimacy in the warm, hushed seclusion of this room—the world forgetting, by the world forgot—when he and Demetrio revelled in the music of their favourite masters. They utterly forgot themselves in the exquisite raptures evoked by the music they made with their own hands. Sometimes they would fall under the spell of some melody during a whole long afternoon, unable to extricate themselves from its charmed circle. How often they would repeat one of Felix Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, which revealed to them, in the depths of their own hearts, a sort of inconsolable despair. How often they had played some sonata of Beethoven, which seemed to snatch up the soul in a close embrace, and bear it in giddy flight through infinite space, or hold it suspended over bottomless abysses.

The survivor's thoughts went back to the autumn of 188—, that never-to-be-forgotten autumn of melancholy and poetry, Demetrio barely convalescent after a severe illness. It was to be his last autumn. After the long period of enforced

silence, Demetrio took up his violin again with strange trepidation, as if fearful of having lost his powers of execution. Oh, the trembling of the wasted fingers, the wavering uncertainty of the bow as he made his first attempt, and the two tears that welled up into his eyes and trickled down his cheeks into his beard, still a little unkempt from his illness!

Again, Giorgio saw the violinist in the act of improvising, while he accompanied him on the piano, following him with almost insupportably close attention, striving to divine his intention, fearing always lest he should break the rhythm, strike a wrong chord, miss a note.

Demetrio Aurispa's improvisations were nearly always inspired by some poem. Giorgio recalled the marvellous chain of melody he wove one day in October round a song from Tennyson's *Princess*—Giorgio had translated it for him, and proposed it as a theme. Where was that sheet?

An impulse of mournful curiosity led him to search for it in a portfolio, lying amongst the music scores. He felt certain that he should find it—he remembered it distinctly—sure enough, there it was.

It was on a single sheet of paper, written in violet ink, the characters faded, the paper crumpled and yellow, pulpy and soft as a cobweb, replete with all the sadness of a page inscribed by a dear and vanished hand.

'Did I write this manuscript—is that my handwriting?' Giorgio asked himself in amazement, hardly recognising the characters for his own. The writing was timid, uneven, almost feminine, carrying still the impress of school-life, the ambiguity of recent adolescence, the charming hesitation of the soul that dares not venture yet to face complete knowledge. 'What a change is here, too!' and he proceeded to read the verses:—

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
In looking at the happy Autumn fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

Fresh as the first beam glistering on a sail,
That brings our friends up from the underworld,
Sad as the last that reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge,
So sad, so fresh the days that are no more.

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
The earliest pipe of half-awakened birds
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square,
So sad, so strange the days that are no more.

Dear as remembered kisses after death,
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned
On lips that are for others; deep as love,
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret,
O Death in Life, the days that are no more!

Demetrio stood beside the piano as he improvised : a trifle paler, stooping a little more than usual, but from time to time he straightened himself up under the breath of inspiration as a bent reed straightens in wind. His eyes were fixed upon the window, through which the landscape, autumn-tinted and nebulous, appeared as in a frame. Gleams of light from the changeful sky outside inundated his figure fitfully, glistened in his eyes or shed a golden halo round his pure and lofty brow. And the violin murmured : *So sad, so fresh the days that are no more!* And the violin wailed : *O Death in Life, the days that are no more!*

A nameless sorrow wrung the heart of the survivor at this reminiscence—this particular picture. After its passage, the silence seemed deeper, more utterly void than before. The frail instrument from which had come Demetrio's loftiest inspirations slept once more in its velvet bed with its four strings intact.

He closed the lid as if over a corpse. The silence around him grew deathly, and ever through the chambers of his heart echoed the mournful refrain : *O Death in Life, the days that are no more!*

For a minute or two he stood before the tragic room. He felt that he was not master of himself; his nerves had the

upper hand of him, forcing on him the disorder and excess of their sensations. A band of iron seemed to encircle his head, dilating and contracting with the pulsations of his arteries. An icy shiver ran through his frame.

With a sudden energetic impulse, almost with vehemence, he turned the handle of the door and entered. He did not wait to look about him, but, keeping in the ray of light from the open door, he went straight to one of the windows and threw it wide ; then he opened the other. After this rapid action, accomplished under the impulse of a sort of horror, he turned round panting and a little giddy. He felt the roots of his hair stir.

What caught his eye before anything else was the bed standing opposite to him with its green coverlet. It was entirely of walnut, but unpretentious in shape, lacking either carving or ornament, even curtains. For the first few moments he saw nothing but the bed, as on that terrible day when, passing the threshold of the room, he had stood petrified before the body.

Conjured up by the imagination of the survivor, the body lay once more upon the bed, the head veiled in black, the arms stretched long and straight at its sides. The garish sunshine streaming in through the windows had no power to dissipate the vision.

In the absolute silence of the room and the silence of his own soul, Giorgio distinctly heard the grinding tick of a death-watch ; and this insignificant circumstance sufficed to relieve, for the moment, the excessive tension of his nerves, as the prick of a needle may empty a taut vessel.

Every detail of that awful day returned to his memory. The sudden news brought to Torelle di Sarsa, about three o'clock in the afternoon, by a breathless, stammering, weeping messenger ; the headlong ride under an August sun across the burning hills, and the sudden faintness that overcame him from time to time, and made him reel in his saddle ; then the arrival at home, the house filled with sobs, and the banging of doors in the wind, and the blood boiling in his veins ; and

lastly, his impetuous entrance into the room, the corpse, the curtains swelling and flapping, the tinkle of the holy-water basin hanging on the wall.

The event had occurred in the early morning of August 4th without the smallest warning preparations. The suicide had left no letter of any kind, not even for his nephew. The will by which he had constituted Giorgio his sole heir was of long-standing date. It was evident that Demetrio had employed the utmost precautions to hide the causes which led him to the deed, and in order to elude the possibility of even drawing an inference he had carefully destroyed all traces of his movements immediately preceding the final act. The rooms were in complete, almost excessive, order—not a paper left on the writing-table, not a book out of its place on the shelves. Only, on the little table beside the bed, the case of pistols—open—nothing more.

Why had he destroyed himself? For the thousandth time that question arose in Giorgio's mind. Had he some secret that was eating out his heart, or was it the cruel keenness of his intellect that made life insupportable to him? 'He bore his fate within him, as I bear mine.'

He looked at the little silver basin hanging at the head of the bed—a symbol of religion—a pious relic of his mother. It was a piece of graceful workmanship, from the hands of the old master goldsmith of Guardiagrele, Andrea Gallucci—a sort of hereditary toy. 'He loved all the accessories of religion—the sacred music, the incense, crucifixes, the hymns of the Latin Church. He was a mystic, an ascetic, the most passionate inquirer into the inner life, but he did not believe in God.'

His eye wandered to the case of pistols, and a thought that had lain dormant in his mind now flashed out like an electric spark. 'I, too, shall kill myself with one of these pistols—with the same one—on the same bed.' After a brief respite, his exaltation returned in full force. The roots of his hair stirred, once again he shuddered to the depths of his being as on the tragic day when he uncovered the dead face and fancied he

could distinguish, through the bandages, the ravages of the wound—the horrible ravages caused by the explosion of the fire-arm, the impact of the ball against the bones of the skull, against that pure and lofty forehead. As a matter of fact, he only saw part of the nose, the mouth and the chin, the rest being hidden in several folds of bandage, because the eyes protruded from their sockets. But the mouth was untouched: those pallid, faded lips which in life had parted so often in a sweet and sudden smile; that mouth which bore death's seal of high unearthly calm, rendered all the more striking by contrast with the bloodstained wreck concealed beneath the bandage.

This was the picture which had remained indelibly graven on the soul of Demetrio's heir, and in all those five years had preserved, by some fatal agency, all the freshness of a first impression.

In thinking that he, too, would lie upon that bed, killed by the same weapon, Giorgio Aurispa experienced none of the agitation and stress which come of a sudden resolve; it was rather an indefinable consciousness of a project formed long ago—though somewhat vaguely—and now brought to the moment of execution.

He opened the case and examined the pistols. They were perfect weapons of their kind—delicate, ribbed duelling pistols of English make, the handles admirably balanced. The case was lined with some pale green material, a little rubbed at the edges of the compartment which contained all that was necessary for loading. The barrels being of somewhat wide calibre, the balls were larger, of the kind that when they reach their aim never fail to produce a decisive effect.

Giorgio took one and weighed it in the palm of his hand. 'In five minutes, perhaps, I shall be dead. Demetrio has left a hollow in the bed where I too shall lie.' And by a sudden transition of fancy, it was himself he now saw stretched upon the couch. But there was the death-watch again! He felt the gnawing of the insect as plainly and with as much alarm as if it were in his own brain. This inexorable sound

came from the bed, and he suddenly experienced all the misery of the man who, before he dies, hears the death-worm at work beneath him. In imagining himself in the act of pulling the trigger, his every nerve contracted in agony and revolt. The incontrovertible certainty rushed in upon him, that he could not kill himself—that he could endure life a little longer—and a sudden expansion of relief ran through him to the uttermost fibre of his being. A thousand invisible threads bound him still to life—‘Ippolita!’

He turned impetuously towards the window—to the light. The distant landscape, nebulously blue and mysterious, melted out of sight with the languorous day. La Majella, all bathed in the liquid gold of the setting sun, leaned her rounded bosom against the sky.

BOOK III—THE HERMITAGE

IN her letter of the 10th of May, Ippolita had said: 'At last I have a free hour to write more fully to you. For ten days now, my brother has dragged his ailments from one hotel to another, all round the lake, and we two women follow him like two souls in purgatory. You cannot imagine the melancholy of this dolorous pilgrimage. I can stand it no longer—I shall seize the first favourable opportunity for leaving them. Have you discovered our hermitage yet?' Then further on: 'The tone of your letters hurts me beyond words. I know what you suffer, and I am pretty certain that you endure more than you can express. I would give the half of my life to be able to convince you, once for all, that I am yours—yours—yours—for ever, even unto death! I think of you—only you—continuously, every instant of my life. Separated from you, I have not a single moment of happiness or peace. Everything bores and irritates me. Oh, when may I be near you every hour of the day—when shall I live in your life? You will see, I shall be another creature, I shall be good and tender and gentle. I shall do my utmost to be always even-tempered, always tactful. I shall tell you all my thoughts, and you will tell me yours. I will be your love, your friend, your sister, and—if you think me worthy—your counsellor. In some ways I have keen intuition—I have tried it a hundred times and never known it fail. My only care shall be to please you, never to be a burden on you. From me you shall never have anything but tenderest love and peace. . . I have many faults, dear heart, but you

must help me to overcome them. You must make me perfect for yourself. You must help me to make a beginning, and afterwards, when I am sure of myself, I shall say to you, "Now I am worthy of you—now I feel that I am as you would have me," and you will have a justifiable pride in thinking that I owe it all to you—that I am wholly your creation. Then you will feel that I am more closely yours, and you will love me better—always better. Oh, it will be a life of love such as never was in all the world before !'

In the postscript: 'I send you a rhododendron blossom, gathered in the park of Isola Madre. Yesterday, in the pocket of that grey dress which you know, I found the bill of the Grand Hôtel d'Europe ou la Poste at Albano, which I begged from you as a souvenir. It is dated April 9th. They have put down "several baskets of wood." Do you remember our great bonfires? Courage—courage—the revival of our happiness is near at hand. In a week or ten days at furthest I shall be wherever you like—never mind where, so long as I am with you !'

II

AND Giorgio Aurispa, with sudden frenzied ardour though with little hope in its ultimate success, put this last expedient to the test.

He left Guardiagrele for the coast, in search of the hermitage. The country, the sea, the movement in the open air, the variety of incidents in the course of such an exploration, his own unusual state of mind, the novelty of the whole expedition, roused him, set him on his feet again, and inspired him with an evanescent self-confidence. He felt as if he had escaped, as by a miracle, from some mortal illness which would have brought him face to face with death. In those first days, life had all the sweetness for him that only convalescents know. Ippolita's romantic fancy hovered before his eyes.

'If she should be able to cure me! A *strong and healthy*

love could make me whole.' He studiously avoided probing his thoughts to the bottom, and closed his ears to the whispered sarcasms called up by those two adjectives. 'In this world, there is but one joy that lasts: the certainty, absolute and incontrovertible, of the possession of another creature. It is that joy which I am seeking. I want to be able to say—My beloved, be she absent or present, lives only in the thought of me, she yields with joy to my every desire, my will is her only law; if I ceased to love her, she would die, and in dying would regret nothing but my love.' He persisted in regarding love only in the light of enjoyment, instead of resigning himself to it as a form of suffering. He allowed his mind to adopt an irremediably mistaken attitude. Once again he struck a blow at his manhood.

At San Vito, in the country of the broom, on the Adriatic, he found what he sought: the ideal hermitage—a house built on a little plateau, half-way up the hill among the olives and the orange-groves, facing a little bay shut in by two promontories.

The architecture was primitive. An outside staircase led to a loggia on to which the doors of the four rooms opened. Each room had, opposite to the door, a window looking out upon the olives. There was a loggia underneath, corresponding to the one above, but the rooms on the ground floor were, with one exception, uninhabitable.

On one side of the house stood the cottage in which the peasant proprietor lived. Two enormous oak-trees, bent towards the hillside by the persistent force of the 'mistral,' overshadowed the little courtyard and protected two stone tables, conveniently placed there for having meals out of doors in summer-time. This courtyard was surrounded by a stone parapet over which acacias hung their perfumed tassels, their delicate and graceful foliage showing clear-cut against the background of sea.

This house was exclusively reserved for visitors, who rented it during the bathing season—a means of livelihood largely practised by the villagers all along the coast of San Vito.

It was about two miles distant from the town, at the extreme limit of some land called 'delle Portelle,' in a warm and sheltered solitude. Each of the promontories was pierced by a tunnel, the mouths of which were visible from the house. The railway ran in a straight line from one to the other close to the sea-shore. At the extreme point of the promontory to the right, stretched over a group of rocks, lay the 'Trabocco,' a peculiar fishing-machine, like an immense spider, composed entirely of planks and beams.

A tenant who proposed to come out of the season was naturally received as an unlooked-for and amazing piece of good luck.

The head of the family, an old man, said at once: 'The house is yours.'

He refused to name a price. 'You can give what you like, and whenever you please, if the house suits you,' he said; accompanying the friendly words, however, with so sharply scrutinising a look that the stranger was startled and embarrassed. The old man had but one eye, and was bald, with two tufts of white hair at his temples, clean shaven of face, and his body all doubled up and supported on a pair of bowed legs. His whole frame was distorted by hard work: from pushing the plough, which forces forward the left shoulder and twists the body; by mowing, which keeps the knees apart; and by vine-cutting, which doubles the body in half; by all the slow and painful labours of agriculture.

'You can give what you please.'

In this affable young man, with his absent, rather lost, look, he had already scented the open-handed gentleman, inexperienced and careless of his money. He knew well that it would be more profitable to leave it to his tenant's generosity than to name any price himself.

'The place is quiet?' Giorgio asked; 'no traffic, no noise?'

The old man pointed to the sea, with a smile. 'That is all you will hear'; and he added, 'Sometimes you might hear a little noise from the loom, but Candia does not work at the

weaving just at present'; and he pointed smilingly to his daughter-in-law at the door, who blushed.

She was blonde, with a bright clear complexion sprinkled with freckles, and already far advanced in pregnancy. Her eyes were large and grey, the irises veined like an agate; two heavy gold rings hung in her ears, and on her breast she wore the *presentosa*, a great star of filigree with two hearts in the centre. Beside her stood a little girl of ten, fair-haired too, and with a very sweet expression.

'You could melt that one in a glass of water,' said the old man. 'Well, there are only the three of us and Albadora.'

Turning towards the olive-grove, he shouted: 'Albadò! Albadora! Elena, you go out and call her,' he said to his granddaughter; and Elena run off.

'Twenty-two children,' he went on. 'Albadora bore me twenty-two—six boys and sixteen girls. I have buried three sons and seven daughters, and the other nine daughters are married. One of my sons went to America, another is at Tocco and works in the petroleum mine; the youngest, Candia's husband, works on the railway, and only comes home once a fortnight—so we are left alone. Ah, signore, it is true that one father may support a hundred children, but a hundred children will not support one father.'

The septuagenarian Cybele now appeared with her apron full of large snails, a soft and slimy mass from which here and there long tentacles stuck up. She was a tall woman, but bent and worn out by hard work and excessive child-bearing, with a small face like a withered apple, on a neck that was full of cavities and tendons. The snails in her apron crawled and twisted and twined over one another in one greenish-yellow, shining, iridescent heap. One of them crawled up the back of her hand.

The old man announced the news.

'This gentleman has taken the house from to-day.'

'God bless you!' she exclaimed, and, coming up to Giorgio with a rather foolish but wholly benevolent air, she blinked at him out of her deeply sunken, almost sightless eyes.

'It is Christ come to earth again. *Sii benedetto!*' she exclaimed. 'May you live as long as there is bread and wine, may you increase and flourish like the sun!'

Then she turned away, and went with a light step through the door by which her twenty-two children had issued forth to baptism.

The old man addressed himself to Giorgio. 'My name is Cola di Ciuzio, but as they called my father Sciampagna, they all call me Cola di Sciampagna. Come and let me show you the garden.'

Giorgio followed him. 'The country promises well this year,' said the old husbandman, walking on in front, and, after the manner of his kind, making prognostications. The garden was luxuriant, containing apparently every sort of abundance within its sheltered walls. Orange-trees cast their floods of perfume abroad, till the whole air tasted of it, as of some generous wine. The other fruit-trees were no longer in flower, but quantities of young fruit hung already from the parental boughs, rocked by the breath of heaven.

'Perhaps this is the higher life,' thought Giorgio; 'a boundless liberty, a noble and fruitful solitude which will enwrap me in its warmest exhalations. To walk amongst these children of the earth, as through a multitude gifted with a new intelligence, surprise the occult thought and divine the mute sentiment hidden beneath the outward rind of things, conform my ways to their ways, fortify my feeble and vacillating soul by the study of these strong and simple ones; contemplate Nature with such uninterrupted attention as to succeed in reproducing in myself the rhythmic palpitation of all created life, and, finally, by a laborious metamorphose of the ideal, identify myself with the tall tree which with its roots absorbs the invisible juices of the earth and imitates with its topmost boughs the rushing voice of the sea. Is not that truly the higher life?' He was overcome by a sort of ecstatic panic at the riotous beauty of the spring which spread around him on all sides. But his fatal habit of self-contradiction soon cut short his transports, drew him back to his

old hypercritical speculations, and put the real in opposition to the ideal. 'We have no real point of contact with Nature; all we have is an imperfect perception of external forms.' It is not possible for man to enter into communion with things. He has indeed the power to pour his whole being into some inanimate object, but never will he receive anything in return. The language of the sea will never be intelligible to him, nor will the earth yield up to him her secret.'

Meanwhile the aged peasant was pointing out to him some prodigy of luxuriance. 'Ah!' said he, 'a good pitful of manure will perform more miracles than all the saints!' Then, pointing to a field of flowering beans at the bottom of the garden, he remarked, 'The bean is the spy of the year.'

The field undulated gently, and the little grey-green leaves fluttered beneath the blue and white flowers. Each blossom was like a pair of half-closed lips, with two dark spots above like eyes. In those that were not full blown the upper petals almost hid these spots, like pale lids drooping over eyes that glanced aside. The trembling and quivering of all these floral eyes and lips had something strangely human, attractive, indescribable about it.

'How happy Ippolita will be here!' thought Giorgio. 'She has a refined and passionate taste for all the humble charms of the earth. I remember her little cries of admiration and delight in discovering an unusual plant, a new flower, a leaf, a berry, a curious insect, a shadow, a reflection.' And he pictured her to himself, slender and light-footed, in graceful attitudes, among all this verdure. A sudden fierce desire assailed him to see her, to win her anew, to make her love him incomparably more than before, to open up a fresh delight to her at every moment.

'Her eyes shall see nothing but me, shall remain insensible to every impression that does not emanate from me; my voice shall be sweeter to her than any other sound in the world.' Love's potency seemed suddenly to become illimitable; all the springs of life leaped up and rushed onwards at giddy speed.

When he ascended the stairs of the hermitage, he thought his heart must burst with the force of this sudden desire. Out on the loggia, he embraced the landscape with a look of rapture, and he felt that at that moment truly 'the sun shone in his heart.'

The sea, broken by a continuous and even ripple, caught the joy spread all abroad in the sky, and flung it back in a myriad of inextinguishable smiles. Through the crystal air the distant points were strangely distinct—to the right, la Penna del Vasto, il monte Gargano, and the island of Tremiti; to the left, la punta del Moro, la Nichiòla, la punta di Ortona. Ortona gleamed like some flamboyant city of the East, on the coast of Palestine, sharply defined against the azure sky—all in parallel lines, but without the minarets. The broom spread its golden mantle over the whole coast. From every bush rose a thick cloud of perfume as from a censer; the air was as delicious as a draught of some elixir.

III

DURING the first few days, Giorgio's whole attention was occupied in arranging the little sanctuary which was to receive the New Life within its peaceful walls, in which he was assisted by Cola di Sciampagna, who seemed able to turn his hand to anything. On a freshly whitewashed strip above the door he wrote with the point of a stick the old and suggestive legend—'Parva Domus, Magna Quies.' Three little roots of wall-flower, sown by the wind in the interstices of a window-sill, he took as a very lucky omen.

But when all was ready and this first ardour had cooled down, he discovered in himself the same unrest, the same dissatisfaction, that old implacable fear of he knew not what. He felt that once again fate had driven him into a perilous by-path. From a very different house, and from other lips, there came to him a cry of recall and of reproach. In spirit he went through the anguish of those tearless yet cruel farewells, when he had lied for pure shame as he read in his mother's desolate eyes the question—too sad to put into words—'For

whom are you deserting me?' Was not that mute question, and the recollection of the blush and the lie with which he had answered it, the real cause of his unrest and discontent here, on the very threshold of the New Life? And how was he to stifle that voice?—by what mad excesses?

He dared not answer. In spite of all his trouble and uncertainty, he earnestly desired to believe in the promise held out to him by Ippolita, he hoped yet to be able to attribute a high moral significance to his passion. Had he not an ardent desire to live, to develop all his forces on even, rhythmical lines, to feel himself a complete and harmonious whole? Love should bring about this miracle; through love he would finally reach the plenitude of his humanity, deformed and consumed hitherto by so much unhappiness of spirit.

It was with such vague hopes and strivings that he sought to silence his remorse; but the thought that dominated him, even before that of the woman he loved, was purely one of sensual desire. In spite of all his platonic aspirations, he could not contemplate love apart from the deeds of the flesh, and he only pictured the days that were to come as a succession of such love-scenes as were already familiar to him. In this benign solitude, alone with a passionate woman such as Ippolita was, what life could he lead but one of indolence and carnal passion?

And all his past unhappiness with its dolorous visions rushed back upon him. He saw his mother's worn face, the red and swollen eyelids scalded by her tears, Cristina's gentle, harrowing smile, the feeble child with his heavy head upon his emaciated little chest, and the corpse-like face of his poor old half-witted aunt.

And ever that question in his mother's hopeless eyes—'For whom are you abandoning us?'

IV

It was afternoon. Giorgio set out to explore the tortuous path that led, by a succession of abrupt rises and descents, to

the Punta della Penna. He looked before him and around him as he walked, alert and curious, as if intent on deciphering some obscure thought, solving some inscrutable mystery expressed in the simple objects that met his view.

In a cleft of the hills that ran along the seashore, the waters of a brook, collected into a sort of little aqueduct made of the scooped-out trunks of trees supported on other trunks, spanned the valley. Other rivulets were conducted through earthenware pipes to the fertile pastures below; here and there, on the rims of these murmuring, glancing rivulets, little violet flowers swayed in airy grace.

The overflow of the water ran away into the sandy shore, passing first under a little bridge. In the shadow of the arch some women were washing linen, their movements being reflected in the water as in a mirror, while the linen was spread out, snowy white, on the sands in the sun. A man was walking along the railway line, barefoot, his shoes dangling in his hand; a woman came out of the pointsman's house, and with a rapid gesture threw away some refuse out of a basket. Two little girls, carrying large bundles of linen, chased one another, laughing shrilly; an old woman was hanging up some skeins of wool dyed blue.

Higher up on the banks which bordered the pathway little shells made spots of white, frail threads of vegetation waved in the breeze. You could still see the marks of the spade which first dug up the virgin soil.

Further on, a large farmhouse came in sight with a huge porcelain flower on the pinnacle of the roof. An outside staircase led to a covered gallery. At the top of the stairs two women sat spinning, their distaffs glittering like gold in the bright sunshine. The click of a weaver's loom sounded through the still air, and through the window you caught glimpses of a woman throwing the shuttle with a rhythmic gesture. In a shed close by lay a huge grey bull, contentedly twitching his ears and his tail to keep off the flies, while the hens scratched busily round him.

Beyond that, a second stream, laughing, ruffled with wave-

lets, infinitely gay and limpid, crossed the pathway. Further on still, near another house, was a large and silent walled garden full of laurels. One of the strongest of them was entirely enveloped in the clinging embrace of a great bryony plant, which had vanquished the austerity of the dark foliage by a flood of snowy blossom and the delicate nuptial freshness of its fragrance; the earth underneath it appeared to have been newly dug up. A black cross suspended in a corner of the wall lent to the silent enclosure that air of mournful resignation which reigns in cemeteries. At the end of the path was a staircase, half in sunshine, half in shadow, leading to a partly opened door over which hung two consecrated branches of olive. On the lowest step of the stair sat an old man, his head bare, his chin resting on his breast, his hands resting on his knees, fast asleep. Through the open doorway above, as if to encourage these senile slumbers, came the even rocking of a cradle and the drowsy hum of a lullaby.

All of which humble things seemed to Giorgio replete with a sense of profound life.

IPPOLITA wrote, promising to join him at San Vito on Tuesday the 20th, arriving about one o'clock in the afternoon.

It was two days till then.

'Come—come,' wrote her lover, 'I am waiting for you here as no one has ever waited before. Every moment that passes is another one irretrievably lost to our delights. Come—all is ready—or no, nothing is ready but my desire. Dearest, you must provide yourself with an inexhaustible supply of patience and indulgence, for all that goes to make life easy is wanting in this rustic and impracticable solitude—and how impracticable! Imagine that it takes nearly three-quarters of an hour to reach the Hermitage from the station at San Vito, and the only means of getting over that road is to do so on

foot along a pathway cut in the granite sheer above the sea. You will need strong shoes and a gigantic umbrella. It would be useless to bring many dresses—just a few cheerful, durable things for our morning walks—and do not forget your bathing-dress. This is the last letter I shall write to you. It will reach you a few hours before your departure. I am writing in the library, a room heaped up with the books which, in all probability, we shall not read. The afternoon is pale and clear, full of the infinite monotony of the sea—oh, would that you were here with me! Addio! Addio! how slowly the hours pass—how could any one ever say that time had wings? What would I not give to fall asleep now and not wake till Tuesday. But no—I shall not be able to sleep—I too have murdered sleep. I have a continual vision of your mouth.'

VI

FOR several days now he had been possessed by the demon of desire. His sensual appetite reawakened with extraordinary vehemence. The merest trifle—a breath of soft air, a whiff of perfume, a rustle among the leaves—sufficed to change his whole being, to send the blood tingling to his face and make his pulses leap, to throw him into a state of mind bordering on delirium.

The faculty which he possessed in such intensity of calling up visions of physical things increased his trouble tenfold. The memory of certain sensations was so keen and so exact, that the effect upon his nerves was the same as that produced by the actual circumstance.

After all, he was the son of his father; this creature, all speculative thought and sentiment, bore in his blood a fatal heritage from that debased and sensual brute. Only that in him mere animal instinct became passion, and sensuality assumed the morbid aspect of a disease. The consciousness of this affected him as grievously as if it had been some shameful malady. He had a horror of the sudden fever which came upon him like a consuming fire and left him wretched,

burned out, incapable of thought. He suffered from the recollection of certain baser impulses, certain devastating blasts of passion which had swept over him, as from a degradation, the marks of which were well-nigh ineffaceable.

At the moment of one of these attacks he had a clear perception that some other person, differing widely from himself, was in his place, penetrating his very substance—an irresistible usurper against whom all defence was vain.

Being of a keen and contemplative turn of mind, he had early occupied himself with the study of his own inner life, and had come to the conclusion that no distraction of the outside world could compare in fascination with that which emanated from the unsounded depths of his own being, into which he gazed with such eager curiosity. Thus he was led to nourish that secret ambition which excites and misleads all truly intellectual men who, with their fine scorn for the common impulses of life, are only curious to understand the laws that govern the course of the passions. After the example of certain eccentric and superficial philosophers of the day, he too aspired to construct for himself an internal world, wherein he might dwell and move *con methodo* in perpetual equilibrium, perpetual calm scrutiny, indifferent to the tumults and sorrows of the vulgar crowd.

But the thousand fatal hereditary evils which he bore in his flesh—the indelible imprint of the generations that had gone before him—effectually prevented him from attaining to those heights towards which his intellect yearned, and barred for him the path of deliverance. His nerves, his blood, every fibre of his substance, held him in servitude to their obscure and intricate necessities.

Giorgio Aurispa was remarkable for an extraordinarily acute development of the sensitive system. Those nerves destined to conduct the impression of external stimuli to the nervous centre had acquired a degree of excitability far surpassing that of the normal individual, so much so as to convert the sensations which are usually pleasant into positive pain.

Sometimes, after one of these excessive exaltations, he would fall into a state of physical inertia, the chief symptom of which was profound indifference to everything in the world—an indifference worse than the most acute sensibility, lasting for days, sometimes for whole weeks. At such times, one thought alone occupied his thoughts—the idea of death.

It was his dear yet terrible and dominating thought. It was as if Demetrio Aurispa, the gentle suicide, were calling to his heir to follow in his steps. And the heir was fully conscious of the inheritance which he carried in the very essence of his being. At times he had an instinctive and horrible presentiment that he stood upon the brink of madness; but mostly, he was imbued with a mournful tranquillity, mingled with deep pity for himself—a sort of rapture of compassion, a mysterious pathos to which he yielded himself up.

Now, after the last crisis from which he had but just escaped in safety, his illusions had returned in great force. Having succeeded in fleeing from the fascinations of death, his vision of life was somewhat clouded still. His reluctance to confront reality and face the true life had held him back on the very edge of the tomb, and now he deluded himself into drawing some ray of possible comfort from the future. 'There is upon earth one lasting happiness: the absolute possession of another human being; that happiness I am in quest of.' He sought the unattainable. His whole mind steeped in doubt, he hoped to obtain the thing most directly opposed to his nature—certainty, and, moreover, certainty in love. How many times had he not witnessed its destruction under the corroding acid of his analysis and criticism? Had he not pursued that will-o'-the-wisp for two long years and in vain?

But it was in the inevitable nature of things that he should nevertheless desire it.

VII

WHEN, in the dawn of the great day, Giorgio Aurispa awoke out of an uneasy slumber, his first thought was: 'She is

coming to-day! In this day's light I shall behold her, clasp her in my arms! It seems as if to-day she will be mine for the first time—I feel as if I could die of it!’ The vision he called up sent a sudden thrill through him from head to foot, like an electric shock, and the terrible physical phenomenon came upon him, against whose tyranny he knew himself to be utterly powerless. His whole being succumbed to the despotism of his senses, once again his inherited sensuality blazed up with irresistible fury in this fastidious and delicate-minded lover, who delighted to call his mistress sister, and yearned for spiritual communion with her. One by one he mentally reviewed her several beauties, and each outline, seen through the flame of his desire, assumed a radiance, a splendour that was chimerical, almost superhuman. He contemplated in spirit her every caress; every attitude was replete with fascination—in her all was light and perfume and rhythm.

And this adorable creature was his—his alone! But with that, on a sudden, like the smoke from a dull fire, the demon of jealousy rose in his mind. To shake it off he jumped out of bed.

In front of the windows the gay green olives swayed gently in the early dawn, the sparrows were beginning to twitter softly above the dull boom of the sea; from a stable near by came the timid bleating of a lamb.

Reinforced by the tonic of the bath, he went out on to the loggia and drank in long draughts of the delicious morning air. His lungs dilated, his thoughts sprang upwards joyously towards the light, a feeling of renewed youth and vigour quickened his pulses and made his heart flutter. Before him he beheld the nativity of the sun, pure and grand in its utter simplicity, without any pageantry of clouds, without mystery. From the glittering waters emerged a rosy face, clear cut, sharply outlined, like a disc of metal rising from a forge.

Cola di Sciampagna, who was busy sweeping the courtyard, looked up and exclaimed, ‘This is a grand *festa* to-day, the

lady is coming. The grain will ripen without waiting for Ascension.'

Giorgio smiled at the old farmer's graceful simile. 'Did you remember to order the women who were to gather the flowering broom?' he asked. 'We must strew the whole path.'

'I have got five of them,' answered the old man, a little impatiently, as if to show that he needed no reminding, and he proceeded to name them, with the addition of the places where the girls came from: 'The daughter of the Ape, the daughter of the Ogre, Favetta, Splendore, the daughter of the South-West Wind.'

These names amused Giorgio immensely. He felt as if all the spirits of the spring were rioting in his heart. Surely these maidens had stepped straight from out a fairy tale to carpet the path with flowers for the 'Bella Romana.'

Returning once more to the pleasing anxiety of expectation, he went downstairs.

'Where are they gathering the flowers?' he asked.

'Up there,' answered Cola di Sciampagna, pointing to a hill; 'in the oak wood. Their singing will guide you to them.' In effect, the sound of girlish voices came fitfully from the hillside, and Giorgio set out to climb the hill and find the songstresses.

The little path wound in and out through a plantation of young oak-trees; at a certain point, it divided into a number of other little paths, the ends of which ran out of sight. Giorgio, following the double track of song and perfume, was not long in finding the field of broom.

It was on a little plateau, and the blossom was so dense as to form apparently one vast and resplendent sulphur-coloured mantle. The five girls were filling their baskets with branches, and singing as they gathered. They were singing at the top of their voices in a perfect harmony of third and fifth. When they came to the refrain, they raised themselves from their stooping posture to give full play to their rounded throats and held the note long, long, looking each other in the eyes, and stretching out their hands all full of blossom.

At sight of the stranger they stopped abruptly and bent once more over the bushes, while ripples of half-suppressed laughter floated over the sea of yellow.

'Which of you is Favetta?' asked Giorgio.

One of the girls, brown as an olive, lifted her head, startled and a little frightened.

'I am, signore,' she answered.

'Are you not the best singer in San Vito?'

'Oh no, signore—that is not true!'

'Yes—she is—she is!' exclaimed her companions. 'Signore, make her sing!'

She protested, laughing shyly, covered with blushes, twisting the corner of her apron, while her friends insisted. She was small but shapely, her bosom full and well developed by singing; she had crisply curling hair, thick eyebrows, an aquiline nose, and carried her head with a little air of barbaric dignity.

At last she consented. Her companions, interlacing their arms, surrounded her in a circle, rising from the waist upwards out of the mass of yellow blossom, amidst the hum of the industrious bees.

Favetta began rather nervously at first, but from note to note her voice grew more assured, as it came limpid, rippling, crystal clear. She sang a verse, and then the others took up the refrain all together, prolonging the final notes in unison, their mouths close together to form one wave of sound, flowing out into the sunlight with the slow cadence of a liturgic chant.

Favetta sang:—

All the fountains are dry,
My poor Love is dead of thirst,
Tromma lari larà
Viva l'amore!

O Love, I thirst, I thirst!
Where is the water thou wast bringing?
Tromma lari larà
Viva l'amore!

I have brought a pitcher of clay
Hanging by a chain of gold.
Tromma lari larà
Viva l'amore !

And her companions repeated : Viva l'amore !

This salutation from the Spring to Love bursting from these bosoms that knew not yet—perhaps never would know—what real sorrow was, sounded in Giorgio's ears like a good omen. The girls, the flowers, the sea—all these free and unconscious creatures breathing the very joy of life around him, touched his spirit like a caress, lulling his tormenting self-consciousness, and inspired him with a sense of grandeur, of harmony and rhythm, of some new faculty, developed gradually in him, and now revealing itself vaguely like the confused vision of some transcendental secret.

The singers showed him their overflowing baskets—a mass of dewy blossom, and Favetta asked : 'Is that enough ?'

'No, not nearly—go on plucking. We must cover the path from the Trabocco right up to the house, and the stairs too, and the loggia.'

'And for the Ascension—you will not leave one flower for Gesù Cristi ?'

VIII

SHE had arrived. She had passed over the flowers like the Madonna of the Miracles. Here she was at last—at last she had crossed the threshold !

And now, tired and happy, speechless, but with a gesture of ineffable abandon, she offered to her lover's lips a face all bathed in tears, and wept and smiled, and wept again, under the storm of his kisses. What mattered now the sad memories of the days in which he had no part ? What mattered the misery, the mortification, the trouble and horrors of the struggle against the inexorable brutalities of life ? What were all the discouragements, all her despondency, compared with this supreme bliss ! She lived and breathed once more in her

lover's arms, she felt herself infinitely beloved. All the rest was nothing—might never have been.

'O Ippolita—Ippolita! Oh, my soul, how much—how much I have longed for you! And you are here, now you will stay with me for many, many a long day, will you not? You shall kill me before you leave me!'

He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her throat, her eyes insatiably, trembling each time he encountered a tear. Those tears, that smile—that look of rapture on the tired face, the thought that this woman had not had one moment's hesitation in consenting to come to him from a great distance, and that now, after a long and fatiguing journey, she was weeping beneath his kisses, unable to speak a word because her heart was too full—all these passionate and tender things refined his emotion, cleansed his love of all impurity, and uplifted his soul.

Drawing out the long pin that fixed her hat and veil, he said, 'How tired you must be, my poor Ippolita—you are so pale—so pale!'

She had pushed up her veil, she still had her cloak and gloves on; he removed her hat—a little action that was familiar to him—disclosing the dear brown head with its simple, smooth coiffure that disguised none of the graceful lines and left the nape of the neck free. She wore a little ruffle of white lace round her throat, and a narrow band of black velvet, which contrasted sharply with the exquisite pallor of her skin. The open cloak disclosed a cloth dress finely striped in black and white—the memorable dress of Albano. A faint scent of violets hung about it as of old.

Giorgio's lips grew more ardent, or, as she used to say, more 'devouring.' He stopped short, however, removed her cloak, helped her to take off her gloves, and, taking her bare hands, pressed them to his temples in a frenzied longing for her caresses. She held his face between her hands, and drawing him to her, passed her soft, warm lips all over his face in one long-drawn kiss. Giorgio recognised the divine, the incomparable mouth which had seemed to him so often to

rest on the surface of his soul, as if in a rapture surpassing all carnal emotion, and communicating itself to some ultra-sensitive element of his spiritual personality.

'You are killing me,' he murmured, faintly vibrating under her hands like an overstrung instrument, a cold tremor running through him from the roots of his hair to the very marrow of his bones. And at the bottom of his heart he was conscious of a vague instinct of terror, such as he had felt already on various occasions.

Ippolita disengaged herself from him. 'I will leave you now,' she said. 'Where is my room? O Giorgio! how happy we shall be here!'

She looked about her smiling, went a few steps towards the door, then stooped, and, picking up a handful of yellow blossom, inhaled its perfume with evident delight. She was still vibrating with emotion, almost intoxicated by this sovereign homage, this dewy glory strewn along her path. Was it not all a dream? Was it she—could this really be Ippolita Sanzio, who in this remote place, this magical country, found herself surrounded and glorified by all this poetry! The tears rose to her eyes, and flinging her arms round her lover's neck, she cried, 'O Giorgio! how grateful I am to you!'

The poetry of it all thrilled and enraptured her; she felt herself lifted out of her humble existence by her lover's idealism—that she was living a new life, a higher life, which, at times, seemed to take away her breath as do the free winds of heaven to lungs that are accustomed to an exhausted atmosphere.

'How proud I am to belong to you! You are my pride! One single minute at your side makes me feel like another woman altogether. I am not Ippolita—not the Ippolita of yesterday—give me a new name!'

'My soul!'

They clung together in a wild embrace with frenzied kisses.

'Now I must go,' said Ippolita, presently disengaging herself. 'Where is my room? Let me see.'

With an arm round her waist Giorgio led her to the door.

What a crowd of saints !' she exclaimed, seeing the long row of pious pictures on the walls and along the head of the bed.

'We shall have to cover them up.'

'Indeed we must !'

Their words came haltingly, their voices changed, shaken with irresistible emotion, hardly able to bear the thought of the rapture that awaited them.

Some one knocked at the door. Giorgio went out on the loggia.

It was Elena, Candia's daughter, come to tell them that the meal was ready.

'What would you like to do ?' said Giorgio, turning irresolutely to Ippolita.

'Really, Giorgio, I am not in the least hungry ; I would rather dine in the evening, if you do not mind.'

'Come,' said he huskily, 'I will show you your dressing-room, your bath ; and everything is ready for you there.' And he led her to a room, the walls of which he had covered entirely with rustic matting.

'You see, your luggage is all here. Good-bye, do not be long, remember that I am waiting impatiently for you and that every minute is a torture. Do not forget.'

He left her, and a minute or two later heard the splash of the great sponge in the water. He pictured to himself its delicious freshness and Ippolita's shiver, as it touched her warm limbs. The splashing ceased, and with the eyes of his desire he saw the woman's form emerge from the bath, delicately pure, like golden-tinted alabaster.

IX

IPPOLITA let herself drift slowly into slumber. Little by little the smile upon her lips grew unconscious—died away—the lips closed for a moment, then fell apart again with infinite languor, disclosing a line of jasmine-white.

She was beautiful thus, with that same beauty which had struck Giorgio for the first time in the mysterious oratory, amidst the perfume of violets, and incense, and the music of the philosopher, Alessandro Memmi. As then she was very pale.

She was pale, but with that pallor which Giorgio had never met with in any other woman; a pallor that was almost mortal, inclining to livid where the shadows deepened. The eyelashes cast a long line of shadow across her cheeks, a faint, scarcely perceptible shade lay on her upper lip. The line of the somewhat large mouth was soft and sinuous, but plaintive, intensely expressive in the hushed silence.

‘How much her beauty is spiritualised by illness or fatigue,’ he mused. ‘She pleases me most like that. I see again the unknown woman who passed before me that evening in February, “who had not a drop of blood in her body.” I believe that in death her beauty will reach its supreme perfection. Dead? And if she should die? I should love her better than in life, free from jealous doubts, with a serene and changeless sorrow. She would then become an object of thought—purely ideal.’

He remembered that once or twice before he had pictured her beauty in the tranquillity and peace of death.

Ah, that day of roses! Great sheaves of white roses drooped languidly in the vases—it was in June, at the outset of their love. She had sunk upon a couch, and lay there motionless, almost without breathing. And he had gazed long at her, till he was seized with a sudden fancy to cover her with roses—softly—not to rouse her—he even laid some in her hair. But, thus enwreathed, she seemed to him lifeless—a corpse. It struck terror to his heart, and he shook her to awaken her, but she never moved, paralysed by one of those dead faints to which she was subject at that time. Oh, the terror and the anguish till she recovered her senses, and yet the enthusiastic admiration for the beauty of that face, so marvellously ennobled by the shadow of death! This episode returned to his memory, but while he lingered

over the strange thoughts it evoked in him, he could not repress a sudden impulse of pity and remorse. He bent over the sleeper and kissed her on the brow, but she was not conscious of it, and he had difficulty in restraining himself from clasping her to him and kissing her on the lips, that she might awaken and respond to his caress. And then he felt all the vanity of a caress which brought no responsive pleasure to the recipient—all the futility of a love which is not a perpetual and immediate interchange of keen emotion; he felt the impossibility of thrilling with rapture unless he were met by a corresponding ecstasy.

‘Am I sure—can I ever be sure—that she loves me as I love her?’

His tortuous line of thought led him back to the tranquillising contemplation of her beauty and to the consideration of their new state. From this day in May, therefore, was to date the New Life.

For a moment he listened with ear and spirit to the great peace surrounding them. Not a sound was to be heard but the low, monotonous voice of the sea. Outside the window the olives waved their branches softly, all silvered by the sunshine, their slender shadows moving lightly over the white curtains. Now and again the sound of voices floated up out of the distance.

Having drunk in the charm of the quiet that enveloped them, he turned his eyes again to the contemplation of his mistress’s beauty. There was a manifest harmony between the rise and fall of her bosom and the breathing of the sea, the correspondence of the two rhythms lending an added charm to the sleeper; and Giorgio thought of the words of Othello: ‘I’d rather be a toad and live upon the vapour of a dungeon, than keep a corner of the thing I love for other’s use.’

Ippolita stirred in her sleep, and a look of suffering passed for a moment over her face. She threw her head back on the pillow, thus affording a full view of her rounded throat, with the faintly raised outline of the arteries. The lower jaw was

somewhat prominent, the chin—in profile—rather too long, and the nostrils a little too wide. Thus foreshortened, these defects were accentuated, but to Giorgio they were not unpleasant, for he was assured that by correcting them the face would lose the essential element of its charm. In her expression, that intangible something which irradiates the material substance, that ever-changing and incalculable force which takes possession of and transfigures the human countenance, that outward and visible sign by which the inward and spiritual grace superimposes on the precise lines of reality a symbolical beauty of a much higher and more complex order—in her expression lay Ippolita Sanzio's greatest charm, because she thereby offered to the passionate observer a constant incentive to emotion and to dreams.

He remembered certain words which Ippolita had said to him in an hour of supreme rapture: 'It is to you I yield my maidenhood—I have never known the thrill of passion.'

Ippolita had married in the spring preceding that of their love. Some weeks afterwards she had begun to suffer from the long and painful illness which chained her to her bed, and kept her, for long weeks, hovering between life and death. At the end of her long convalescence she had entered into the passion of love as in a dream—suddenly, blindly, madly, she had abandoned herself to the man whose strange and gentle voice had spoken words to her such as she had never heard before. She was speaking the strict truth, therefore, when she said that to him she yielded her maidenhood; she had never known the touch of passion.

In evoking these memories, Giorgio felt a breath of those first days of passion pass over him. At those words he had felt the thrill of a creator. For after that, what a change had come over this woman! Some new tone, indefinable but real, had come into her voice, her movements, her expression, her slightest actions. Giorgio had witnessed that transformation, so intoxicating to a lover of intellect—the metamorphosis of the woman he loves to his own image. He had seen her gradually adopt his thoughts, his judgment, his tastes, his

prejudices, predilections, and melancholy—all that gives a special character to the mind. In speaking she used certain turns of phrase which he affected, certain inflections of pronunciation peculiar to him; even her handwriting grew to be like his. Never had the influence of one being upon another been more rapid or more intense.

Ippolita merited, in truth, her lover's designation: 'Gravisdum suavis.'

But who could say among what humiliating surroundings the 'grave and sweet' creature, whom he had imbued with his own antipathy to the vulgar things of life, passed the long hours when she was away from him?

He thought of his anguish in former days when she had parted from him to return to her husband's house, to a world of which he was entirely ignorant, to the commonplace, dull *bourgeois* life, in the midst of which she had grown up like a rare plant in a kitchen-garden. Had she never had anything to conceal from him in those days? Had she never deceived him? always used her illness effectually as a shield against her husband's importunities—always?

Giorgio remembered the pain and horror that assailed him one day when she arrived late, breathless, hot—her cheeks flushed, her hair saturated with that tenacious smell of tobacco, which can only be gained by staying a long time in a room full of smokers.

'Forgive me,' she panted; 'I am late, but some friends of my husband's were lunching with us, and they kept me till now.' At which he instantly had a picture of the common, middle-class table, and the men making their coarse jests round it.

A multitude of similar little incidents occurred to him with the infinity of cruel pain to him attendant on them, not confined to those early days only, but quite recently, since Ippolita had returned to her mother's house—a life of which he was equally ignorant, equally distrustful.

'Now, at last, I have her with me! Every day and all day long I shall see her; she is mine; her mind will be constantly

occupied with me—my thoughts, my dreams, my sorrows. I can devote my every moment to her without fear of interruption, planning a thousand new means of pleasing, perturbing, saddening, exciting her. She will be so permeated by me that she will finally think that I am an essential element of her life.' And as he gazed at the delicate and complicated creature enfolded in the mystery of sleep, that perplexing being from whose every pore there seemed to radiate some occult and incredibly intense fascination, a vague, instinctive terror took possession of him again.

Ippolita stirred uneasily in her sleep and moaned faintly, from her half-closed lips the breath came rapidly and unevenly, while now and again her brows contracted. She was dreaming. Of what? Then she drew two or three deep sobbing breaths and moved again uneasily.

A prey to a wild, unreasoning fear, Giorgio hung breathlessly over her—listening—fearful lest she should speak—whisper a name, perhaps—a man's name? He waited in horrible suspense, as if menaced by a blow that should strike him dead upon the spot.

She opened her eyes and looked at him confusedly, half conscious only, still drowned in sleep. 'What were you dreaming of?' he asked, in a voice that shook with the rapid beating of his heart.

'I don't know,' she answered drowsily, 'I cannot remember'; and pillowing her cheek upon his shoulder, she fell asleep once more.

But Giorgio remained unappeased, even by the tender pressure of that cheek; a feeling of sullen resentment against her in his heart, estranged, isolated, hopeless of satisfying his curiosity. All his bitter recollections rushed back upon him. In one moment he lived through the wretchedness of the last two years. He was powerless to fight against the hideous doubts that took his mind by storm.

Suddenly Ippolita shuddered and winced as from a blow. She opened a pair of startled eyes, and moaned: 'O Dio!'

'What is it? what were you dreaming of?'

'I do not know'; but her face quivered convulsively. She was evidently in pain. 'O Dio mio!—the old pain.'

Since her illness she had suffered occasionally from spasms of pain that soon passed but often wrung a groan from her.

Turning to Giorgio she fixed a lucid gaze upon his face, surprising there some traces of the tempest that had raged within him.

'Ah—how can you hurt me so!' she murmured, in fond reproach.

Giorgio seized her in his arms, and, clasping her in a frenzied embrace, suffocated her with kisses.

X

'SHALL we have dinner out of doors this evening?' asked Giorgio, for the air was warm as summer.

Ippolita assenting, they went downstairs together slowly, hand in hand, setting their feet on the same step at the same moment, stopping to look at the trodden flowers, and then turning to one another, as if they saw each other for the first time. Each noticed that the eyes of the other were larger, deeper, with a far-away look, and encircled by a shadow that seemed almost supernatural. They smiled at one another but did not speak, wholly dominated by the charm of that indefinable sensation by which the gross substance of their being seemed to float in space, ethereal as a vapour. They wandered across to the parapet and leaned over it, gazing at and listening to the sea.

What they saw was strangely, wonderfully grand, and yet illumined by a friendly light, like an irradiation from their own hearts. What they heard was strangely, wonderfully loud, and yet it seemed a secret whispered to their hearts alone.

But only for a second, and it is gone. They were recalled to themselves—not by the breath of the wind, nor the murmur of the waves, nor by a human voice, but by the fear that grew out of the very excess of their bliss. One second—

and it was gone irrevocably—and they both awoke once more to the flight of time and of life, to the fact that all those high things which had seemed so near to them had grown strange, that the old fear had returned to their souls, and that their love was imperfect. That moment of sublime self-forgetfulness had passed away for ever.

Affected by the solemn solitude, oppressed by a vague fear in the presence of these vast waters, stretching away beneath the empty sky which paled by slow degrees till it touched the horizon, Ippolita murmured, 'How far it is!'

It suddenly seemed to them both that the spot on which they stood was immeasurably remote from the places they had known before, isolated, unheard of, inaccessible, almost beyond the limits of the world. In the same hour that saw the realisation of the dearest wish of their hearts, they were both seized with the same dark terror, a foreboding of their utter inability to support the fulness of the New Life. A moment or two longer they stood silently side by side, but with parted hands, gazing out upon the rolling white-crested waves of the cold, grey Adriatic—while ever and anon the fresh breeze shook the fragrant locks of the acacias.

'What are you thinking of?' asked Giorgio, trying to shake off the heavy cloud of melancholy which was settling down upon him.

Here he was, alone with his beloved, alive and free, and yet he was not satisfied. Was there, perchance, no remedy for the desperate yearning of his soul?

Feeling the distance widen between him and the pensively silent woman at his side, he took her hand again and gazed deep into her eyes. 'Where are your thoughts?' he asked.

'In Rimini,' she answered, with a smile.

The past again! How could she think of the days long passed at such a moment! Did the same ocean stretch before their eyes, veiled by the same illusion? His first impulse was one of hostility against his unconscious companion, then—a sudden agitation—and in a flash, he saw all the summits of his love blaze up and cast a dazzling

light across the past. Things of long ago floated back to his memory on waves of delicious sound that exalted and transfigured them. He lived over again in one second the most lyric hours of his passion, and that in places the most favourable to the impressions, amidst those sumptuous settings of nature and of art which served to ennoble and deepen his happiness. But why, in the face of that past, should the present moment grow dull and faded? To his eyes, dazzled by those flamboyant memories, all around him sank into dreariness and gloom, affecting him with an indefinable physical discomfort as if the external phenomena were intimately connected with some vital principle in him.

He searched for something to say which should recall Ippolita to him, and give him back that sense of reality in the present which he had come near losing. But it was not easy, his ideas eluded him, vanished, and left his mind a blank.

'Are you hungry?' he asked, at last hearing the clatter of plates.

This question, suggested by a slight and material fact, and asked with boyish vivacity, seemed to amuse Ippolita. 'Yes, rather,' she answered, smiling.

They turned, and found the table laid under the oak-tree. A minute or two later their dinner appeared.

'You must make the best of what you can get here,' said Giorgio; 'the food is very rustic.'

'Oh, I should be perfectly satisfied with grass,' she answered gaily, running up to the table and examining the cloth, the knives and forks, the glasses, the china. She found it all charming, and was as pleased as a child over the great flowers on the fine blue and white china service.

'Everything here is quite delightful!' she said; and taking up the great round loaf, still warm under its swelling brown crust, she inhaled its odour with intense enjoyment.

'Oh, what a good smell!' she cried; and, as if seized with childish greed, she broke off a piece of the crust and bit into it with her strong white teeth. Every movement of her sinuous

lips expressed her enjoyment of what she was eating, while her whole person seemed to exhale such a breath of pure fresh grace, that Giorgio was fascinated and surprised, as by some unexpected novelty.

‘Try it—you will see how good it is!’ She held out the piece of bread to him in which the marks of her teeth still glistened moistly, and pushed it between his lips, laughing and drawing him under the contagious spell of her hilarity.

‘Taste!’

He thought it delicious; and abandoning himself to the evanescent charm, let himself be captivated by this new form of seduction. A wild desire came over him to snatch up the enchantress and bear her off as the eagle does his prey. His heart burned with a confused longing for physical force and rude health, for the joys of an almost savage life, for love that was simple and untrammelled, for the grand freedom of the primordial world. He felt a sudden desire to slough the old skin and emerge from it a new man, immune of all the ills that he was heir to, of all the deformities that had impeded his course hitherto. He had a delusive vision of a future existence in which, freed from all sinister errors and all extraneous tyranny, he should look at things as if he saw them for the first time, and the face of the world be revealed to him like a human countenance. Why might not this miracle be performed by the young and joyous woman who, at the stone table under the o’ershadowing oak, had broken the new bread and offered it to him? Might not this day, in very truth, be the first of the New Life?

BOOK IV—THE NEW LIFE

THE cast wind was blowing, moist and oppressively hot, under a misty, milk-white sky. The sea, which had lost all motion and substance, melted into the vague mists, infinitely pale and pulseless. Away in the direction of the isles of Diomedée, a single sail hung motionless, indefinitely prolonged in the watery mirror below, the one visible centre of an inert world which seemed ready to faint with languor.

Seated on the parapet of the loggia in an attitude of hopeless fatigue, Ippolita fixed a fascinated gaze on that solitary white sail. Her shoulders slightly bent, her whole form relaxed, her expression was dull almost to vacuity, betraying the momentary eclipse of her vital energies, the absence of expression accentuating all that was ordinary and irregular in her features, especially the heaviness of the lower part of the face. Even the mouth—so sinuous and soft—at whose touch her lover had often felt a pleasure so acute as to be pain, that mouth seemed now despoiled of all its witchery and reduced to a mere vulgar organ whose caress could only be a mechanical action devoid of all beauty or poetry.'

'All is at an end between us at one blow—the flame is spent—I love her no longer,' thought Giorgio, regarding with a penetrating and clear-sighted eye the crude realism of the unconscious woman into whose life he had so madly thrust his own up till this day. 'I love her no longer! How can it have come about thus, all in a moment?' What he felt was not only the aversion which inevitably follows on over indulgence, but a severance still more complete and violent.

and that was, moreover, definite and irremediable. 'How can I ever love her again after having seen her thus?'

The phenomenon was one which happened constantly with him: out of his first impressions—isolated and exaggerated as a rule—he constructed for himself a phantom which had the power of giving an infinitely stronger impulse to his nerves than the actual object present. Thus, with inconceivable intensity he now regarded Ippolita exclusively from the sexual point of view, saw in her only the inferior creature, without spiritual value, a mere instrument of pleasure and lust, an instrument of ruin and of death. He had been horrified at his father, but what was he doing, after all, but the very same thing? His mind reverted to his recollection of his father's mistress and to certain details of the humiliating altercation with that repulsive man in the country villa, at the open window, through which he had heard the shouts of the little bastards at play; the great table heaped with papers under which he had caught a glimpse of the letter-weight with its obscene picture.

'Ah, Dio mio, how close it is!' murmured Ippolita, detaching her eyes from the white sail which still hung motionless in space. 'And you—are you not exhausted?'

She left her seat and dragged herself to a great cane chair full of cushions, into which she sank with a deep sigh, and let her head fall back, closing her eyes while her arched eyebrows quivered. At one stroke she had turned absolutely beautiful. Her beauty had lit up suddenly like a torch.

'Oh, when will the mistral blow! Look at that sail, it does not move an inch. It is the first white one I have seen since I have been here. I feel as if it were a dream.' And as Giorgio did not answer, she added: 'Have you seen any others?'

'No—it is my first one, too.'

'Where do you think it has come from?'

'Perhaps from Gargano.'

'And where is it going?'

'Perhaps to Ortona.'

‘What does it carry?’

‘Oranges, perhaps.’

She began to laugh, and even her laughter, rippling out in a wave of sparkling freshness, transfigured her anew.

‘Look—look!’ she cried, raising herself on one elbow and pointing to the horizon, from which a curtain seemed to have been lifted. ‘Five other sails over there, all in a line—do you see them?’

‘Yes, yes, I see.’

‘Are there five of them?’

‘Yes—five.’

‘There come more—over there, look—another line of them—what a number!’

The sails appeared on the extreme limit of the sea, motionless, like little tongues of red flame.

‘The wind is changing—I feel it changing now. Look there how the water is ruffled.’

A little puff of wind struck the tassels of the acacias, shaking down a blossom or two like dead butterflies; but by the time they reached the ground all was still again. In the silence you could hear the dull splash of the waves breaking against the shore, the sound growing fainter as the water ran along the coast, and then ceased altogether.

‘Did you hear?’

She had risen, and was leaning over the parapet, listening intently, in the attitude of one who tunes an instrument.

‘Here it comes!’ she cried, pointing again to the crisp ruffling on the water, which heralded the breeze, and she waited with lively impatience, eager to draw in a long draught of the cool wind.

A moment or two and it caught the acacias, sending down a rain of blossom, and bringing the salt smell of the sea right into the loggia, mingled with the perfume of faded flowers. A silvery sound of peculiar sweetness filled the hollow of the little bay between the two promontories with its tinkling music.

‘Do you hear?’ said Ippolita, in a low, exultant voice,

as if this music penetrated to her very soul, and her whole being participated in the incidents that were happening around her.

Giorgio followed her every movement, her every gesture, her every word, with such intense absorption, that nothing else existed for him. His former impression of her in no way coincided with what he actually saw in the present, though he was, nevertheless, still so much under its dominion as to retain the sense of a moral gulf between them, and so prevent him from replacing her on her former pedestal, from re-establishing her in her former character, from reintegrating her, as it were. Yet every one of her actions, her words, her gestures, wove a spell about him from which there was no escape—physical manifestations of a force which enthralled and held him captive. It seemed as though between him and this woman there existed some corporeal bond, a sort of organic dependence on one another, by virtue of which her slightest action called forth an involuntary echo in him, and that he was incapable of ever living or feeling independently again. But how then reconcile this evident affinity with the strange antipathy to her he had but just now discovered in the depths of his heart?

Actuated by spontaneous curiosity, and by an instinctive need of multiplying her sensations, and of throwing herself, heart and soul, into her surroundings, Ippolita was still intent upon the scene before her. The facility she possessed for entering into communion with all forms of natural life, and of finding numberless analogies between humanity and the aspect of objects the most divergent from it; the rapid and diffuse sympathy which enabled her to attach herself not only to the things she encountered every day, but to those which were strange to her; the sort of genius she had for expressing by a single sign the distinctive character of any object animate or inanimate, and of conversing with domestic animals and understanding their language; it was exactly these faculties, to a certain extent imitatory, which combined to reveal to Giorgio's eyes the predominance in her of the lower instincts of life.

'What can that be?' she asked, wondering, as a curious dull roar sounded out of the distance. 'Do you not hear it?'

It was like a blow, followed by other blows in rapid succession—a most singular sound, coming, it might be, from close at hand or from far away; one could not tell which in that exquisitely limpid atmosphere.

'Do you not hear it?'

'Perhaps it is distant thunder.'

'Ah, no!'

'Then what?'

They looked about them puzzled. The sea changed colour from moment to moment as the mist lifted. Here and there it took on the indefinable green tints of unripe flax when the slanting rays of an April sunset glance athwart the diaphanous stems.

'Ah, it is the flapping of a sail!' cried Ippolita, delighted at being the first to solve the mystery; 'that white sail over there! Look! It is just going to catch the wind—there—now it is moving!'

II

WITH some intervals of sleepy indolence, she had an inextinguishable desire to be out of doors, to brave the full heat of the sun, tramp along the shore and through the country, to explore unbeaten paths. She incited her companion to do the same; sometimes she would drag him out by force, at others she would start off by herself and let him join her unawares.

To reach the top of the hill, they followed a little path bordered by hedges laden with purple flowers amongst which some other flowers, large and snowy white with five petals, nodded their perfumed heads. On the other side of the hedges was a waving sea of corn, greenish yellow, but here and there ready to turn to gold, the blades in places so tall and thickly crowded that they overtopped the hedges like a fair cup filled to o'erflowing.

Nothing of all this escaped Ippolita's quick eye. Every minute she was bending down to blow away the little balls of fluff that balanced themselves so daintily on their long frail stalks, or to watch the tiny spiders climb from some lowly flower to a high branch by an invisible silken thread.

On the hill, in a little sunny hollow, was a field of flax, already dry. Each yellow stalk carried a ball of gold, stained apparently here and there by rusty red. The motion of the tallest stalks was so slight as to be scarcely perceptible to the eye, the whole thing being so excessively light and airy that it suggested the idea of a piece of goldsmith's work.

'Look,' said Ippolita, 'it is gold filigree.'

The broom was beginning to drop. From some branches hung little fluffy white cocoons, up others climbed great black and yellow caterpillars soft as velvet to the eye. Ippolita took one of them with spots of vermilion on its delicate fur, and held it calmly in the palm of her hand.

'It is more beautiful than a flower,' she said.

Giorgio remarked, and not for the first time, her almost total absence of that repugnance to insects which is an instinct with most of us, and that, as a rule, she showed no sign of that keen and unconquerable aversion that he felt himself for a host of things usually considered disgusting.

'Oh, please throw it away!' he entreated.

She laughingly stretched out her hand, as if to put the caterpillar on his neck. He gave a cry of disgust, and started back, which only made her laugh the more.

'Oh, what a brave fellow!'

Throwing herself into the fun of the thing, she flew in pursuit of him, in and out amongst the stems of the young oaks, down the steep paths that formed a sort of mountain labyrinth, her bursts of laughter starting bands of wild sparrows from among the grey rocks.

'Stop! stop!' she cried, 'you are frightening the sheep!'

A little flock of startled sheep rushed down the rocky path, dragging after them a bundle of blue rags.

'Stop! I have nothing in my hand now—look!' and she

showed her flying victim her empty hands. 'We must help the mute,' she cried, running towards a woman all in tatters, who was vainly endeavouring to hold back the sheep by long ropes of twisted osier. Ippolita caught the bundle of ropes, and fixed her feet firmly against a stone to have more resistance. With her glowing face and panting bosom, and in that forceful attitude, she was very beautiful.

'Come here—you come too!' she cried to Giorgio, communicating to him her frank and childlike joy.

The sheep stood still among the broom bushes. There were six of them—three white and three black—the osier ropes being fastened round their woolly necks. The woman who was herding them, a little old hag, indifferently covered by her blue rags, gesticulated wildly, emitting strange inarticulate sounds from her toothless mouth. Her little, greenish eyes, without lashes, watery and bloodshot, had a baleful expression.

When Ippolita held out some money to her, she kissed the coins, then, dropping the ropes, she took from her head a filthy rag, utterly devoid of shape or colour, stooped, and with immense precautions tied up the coins in a string of knots.

'I am tired now,' said Ippolita; 'let us sit down here for a little while.'

They seated themselves, and Giorgio then observed that they were close to the great field of broom where, on that May morning, the five maidens had gathered the blossom to strew the path of the *Bella Romana*. How distant that morning seemed to him now—lost in the mist of dreams.

'Do you see those bushes over there that have hardly any flowers now?' he said. 'That was where we filled our baskets with flowers to scatter under your feet the day you arrived. What a day it was! Do you remember?'

She smiled, and with sudden impulsive tenderness took his hand and held it close in hers, pressing her cheek against her lover's shoulder, and abandoning herself to the sweetness of that memory, that solitude, that peace, that poetry.

From time to time a breeze rustled through the tops of the

oaks, and further down the hill a ray of silver light would pierce the grey-green of the olives. The deaf-mute disappeared slowly in the wake of her grazing sheep, seeming to leave behind her an impression of something fantastic, an echo of the tales in which evil fairies transformed themselves into toads at a turn of the forest path.

‘Are you not happy now?’ murmured Ippolita.

‘A fortnight has passed,’ thought Giorgio to himself, ‘and nothing has changed in me—always the same impatience, the same unrest, the same discontent. We have hardly begun, and already I see the end. What can I do that will enable me to enjoy the passing hour?’ Certain portions of a letter of Ippolita’s recurred to him: ‘Oh, when may I be with you every hour of the day? when shall I live your life? You will see, I shall be a different woman. I shall impart to you all my thoughts, and you will tell me yours. I will be your love, your friend, your sister—even, if you judge me worthy of it, your counsellor. You shall find nothing in me but tenderness and repose. It will be a life of love, such as has never yet been seen!’

‘And yet, during this fortnight,’ he mused, ‘our life has been entirely made up of such little material episodes as that of to-day. It is perfectly true that she seems to me a different woman. In appearance, too, she has begun to change. It is incredible how quickly she seems to absorb health. It seems as if every breath she drew benefited her, that everything she eats is turned to good account, that the good air penetrates her every pore. She was made for this life of indolence and freedom, of physical enjoyment and absence of care. Up till the present, no serious word has passed her lips, or one that gave evidence of any preoccupying thought. Every day she becomes more puerile in her actions, her tastes, her desires. We have nothing in common except in relation to a refined sensuality. She applies herself to her sensual pleasures with the same lingering care and solicitude as when she tastes a favourite fruit or strives to prolong any other pleasure, no matter how trivial, proving effectually that she

does not care to live for anything else, that she is wholly occupied in cultivating and adorning her sensations and mine. Her intervals of silence and repose are merely the result of muscular fatigue, as at this moment.'

'What are you thinking about?' she asked.

'Nothing—I am happy.'

'Shall we go on?' she added, after a moment's pause.

As they rose, she pressed a loud kiss on his lips. She was gay but very restless, leaving his side every moment to rush down some little path between the rocks, and stopping herself in mid-career by clinging to the trunk of a young oak which would creak and bend under her weight.

She plucked a violet flower and sucked it.

'That is honey,' she said, and plucked another, and held it to her lover's lips.

'Taste it,' she said. By the movement of her mouth she seemed to be enjoying the sweet flower over again.

'With all these flowers and these bees, there must be a hive somewhere near,' she remarked. 'I must come out and look for it, one of these mornings while you are asleep—I will bring you back some honeycomb.'

She ran on for a long time about this adventure, which evidently took her fancy, and through her words there ran all the liveliness of real sensations—the freshness of morning, the mystery of the woods, the impatience of the search, the delight of the discovery, the golden colouring, and sweet, wild fragrance of the honey.

They halted on the hillside on the edge of the wooded region, attracted by the soothing melancholy that rose up to them from the sea.

The water took on delicate tints between blue and green, in which the green tended to predominate, but the sky, at the zenith a leaden blue streaked with clouds, grew rosy in the downward curve towards Ortona, casting pale reflections on the surface of the water like handfuls of floating rose-leaves. Against the marine background rose, in harmonious succession, first the two great oak-trees with their sombre foliage,

then the silvery olives, and lastly, the fig-trees with their bright green leaves and violet-hued branches. The moon, orange-coloured, enormous, and almost full, rested on the rim of the horizon like a globe of crystal through which you caught a vision of a fantastic landscape modelled in bas-relief on a disc of massive gold.

The birds were singing far and near, an ox lowed, then there came a bleat, and after that the cry of a child. There was a pause when all the voices were silent, and they heard nothing but that one plaintive sound.

It was neither loud nor sobbing, but feeble and continuous, almost musical. It attracted the heart, drawing the attention away from everything else, and broke the seductive spell of the evening by oppressing the soul with a real sense of pain, responsive to the sufferings of an unknown being, a little invisible child.

‘Do you hear that?’ said Ippolita, involuntarily lowering her voice, which was full of compassion; ‘I know who that is crying.’

‘You know?’ asked Giorgio, strangely moved by the tone of her voice and her look.

‘Yes.’ She listened once more to the plaintive wail that now seemed to fill the air, and then added: ‘It is the baby whom the vampires are sucking.’

She uttered the words without the shadow of a smile, as if she fully believed in the superstition.

‘It is down there in that cottage—Candia told me about it.’

‘Shall we go and see it?’ said Ippolita, after a slight interval of hesitation, during which they both listened to the cry, which raised a fantastic vision of the moribund baby. ‘It is not far.’

Giorgio was undecided what to do, afraid of the painful sight and of coming in contact with these afflicted and wretched people.

‘Would you mind?’ insisted Ippolita, her curiosity getting the better of her. ‘It is down there in that cottage under the pines. I know the way.’

‘Very well.’

She walked straight on, hastening her steps, and across a sloping field. Neither spoke, both were listening intently to the infant cry that served them as a guide. And step by step their pain grew more poignant as the moaning waxed more distinct and more expressive of the poor, suffering creature from whom it proceeded.

They crossed an orchard of flowering orange-trees, treading upon the blossoms strewn thickly on the ground. In the doorway of a cottage, close by the one they were looking for, sat a preposterously corpulent woman, her monstrous body surmounted by a little round face with gentle eyes, white teeth, and a placid smile.

‘Oh, signora, where are you going?’ she asked, without rising.

‘We are going to see the bewitched baby.’

‘Why go there? Stay here a little and rest—see how many I have.’

Three or four naked children, their stomachs so swollen as to seem dropsical, were crawling about the doorway on all-fours, grunting, and stuffing into their mouths whatever they could lay their hands on. In her arms the woman held another one, with its face all covered with dark-brown scabs of numberless sores, from out of which shone a pair of eyes pure and blue as fairy flowers.

‘You see I have plenty, and what this one is like. Stay here a little.’

She smiled, soliciting with her eyes the alms of the strangers.

‘Why should you go there?’ she repeated, in a tone intended to dissuade their curiosity by inspiring them with a vague sense of danger. ‘Look at this one’; and again she directed their attention to her afflicted child, but without any pretence of grief, as if she simply offered to the passer-by an object of pity nearer at hand than the other—as who should say: ‘As you wish to be compassionate, then be so to the one before you.’

Giorgio gazed with profound distress at the terrible little face and the sweet pure eyes, which seemed to gather into themselves all the diffused light of the June evening.

'How does it come to be like that?' he asked.

'Who can tell?' replied the mother, in the same placid tone; 'it is the will of God that he should be so.'

Ippolita gave her alms, and they went on their way to the other cottage, retaining in their nostrils the foetid odour which streamed out of the shadowy doorway.

They were silent, a pang in their hearts, disgust in their mouths, and their knees giving way beneath them. They heard the tremulous wailing mingled with other voices, other sounds, and they were astonished that they should have heard it so distinctly and at such a distance. But their eyes were involuntarily attracted to the tall, straight pine, its hardy trunk showing black against the luminous evening sky, its topmost branches noisy with the twittering of a colony of sparrows.

As they approached, a murmur ran through the circle of women surrounding the sufferer. 'Here are the gentlefolk—the strangers from Candia's.'

'Come, come.'

And they opened the circle to permit of the new-comers' closer inspection. One of them, a dried-up, wrinkled old crone, with sightless, glassy eyes, sunk deep in their orbits, touched Ippolita on the arm and said, 'Look, signora, the vampires are sucking its blood—poor thing! Look what they have brought it to. Heaven preserve your own children. Cross yourself, signora,' she added.

Her voice was dry and harsh, like the sounds articulated by an automaton, and the warning sounded all the more lugubrious coming from that toothless mouth, and the voice that had lost all living, human characteristics. Ippolita made the sign of the cross, and glanced at her companion.

The women were ranged in a circle in the clearing in front of the cottage door, as if at a show, making, from time to time, some mechanical sign of condolence; the circle of

spectators was incessantly renewed, those who were tired of looking being replaced by new-comers from the surrounding cottages, most of them saying the same words and repeating the same gestures as they contemplated this lingering death.

The baby lay in a rough pine cradle, like a coffin without a lid. The miserable little object, naked, emaciated, livid, wailed continuously, feebly stirring its skinny arms and legs as if imploring succour. The mother, seated at the foot of the cradle, bent double, till her head almost touched her knees, gave no sign of hearing. It looked as if some terrible weight pressed on the back of her neck and prevented her from raising herself. Now and then, with a mechanical gesture, she laid her bony, rough and sunburnt hand on the edge of the cradle and rocked it, but without changing her position or breaking her silence. Then the images of the saints, the charms, the reliques with which the cradle was hung round, would sway and jingle in a momentary pause in the wailing.

‘Liberata ! Liberata !’ cried one of the women, shaking her. ‘Look, Liberata, the lady is here—the lady has come to see you—look up at her.’

The mother lifted her head slowly, and gazed about her bewildered, then fixed upon her visitor a pair of dry and desolate eyes, in the depths of which there was less of grief than of helpless sombre terror—terror of the nocturnal sorcery against which every kind of exorcism was unavailing—terror of the insatiable vampires who had taken up their abode in the house, and would probably only leave it with the last corpse.

‘Speak, speak !’ urged another woman, shaking her by the arm. ‘Ask the signora to send you to our Lady of Miracles.’

‘Yes, signora,’ entreated the rest, surrounding Ippolita, ‘do that for her ! Send her to the Madonna, send her to the Madonna !’

The baby’s cry grew louder. The sparrows in the top of the pine-tree set up a piercing clamour ; close by, among the gnarled trunks of the olives, a dog barked ; the shadows began to deepen under the moonlight.

'Yes—yes,' stammered Ippolita, incapable any longer of supporting that fixed and silent gaze. 'Yes—we will send her—to-morrow.'

'Not to-morrow, signora, on Saturday.'

'Saturday is the vigil.'

'Let her buy a candle.'

'A beautiful wax candle.'

'Yes—a ten pound one.'

'Do you hear, Liberata, do you hear?'

'The lady is going to send you to the Madonna.'

'The Madonna will have pity on you.'

'Speak, speak!'

'She has gone dumb, signora.'

'She has not spoken for three whole days.'

The baby's cry pierced through the confusion of female voices.

'Listen how it cries!'

'It always cries worse at night, signora.'

'Perhaps one of *them* is coming.'

'Perhaps it *sees*——'

'Make the sign of the cross, signora.'

'It will soon be dark.'

'Hark, how it cries!'

'I believe you can hear the bell.'

'No, you cannot hear it at this distance.'

'Silence!'

'You cannot hear it from here.'

'But I do hear it.'

'So do I.'

'Ave Maria!'

They stopped speaking, made the sign of the cross, and bent the knee. It really seemed that some scarcely audible wave of sonorous sound came over from the distant town, but the child's cry confused the listening ear. Once more this became the only sound. The mother had fallen on her knees beside the cradle with her forehead to the earth. Ippolita, with bowed head, was praying fervently.

'Look, there in the open doorway,' whispered one of the women to her nearest neighbour.

Giorgio, on the alert and nervous, turned his head. The doorway was full of deep shadow.

'Look, there in the doorway—do you not see anything?'

'Yes—I see,' faltered the other, undecided and frightened.

'What is it? what do you see?' asked a third.

'What do you see?' asked a fourth.

'What is it?' and in a moment, curiosity and fear had taken possession of the whole of them. Every eye turned towards the door. The child went on crying; the mother rose from her knees, and she too fixed her wild dilated eyes upon the doorway, to which the shadow imparted a mysterious horror. The dog continued to bark among the olives.

'What is it?' asked Giorgio, in a loud, firm voice, but not without an effort, lest he should be infected by the prevailing atmosphere of terror. 'What do you see?'

None of the women ventured to answer, but they all saw the vague outline of something looming through the shadow.

He boldly approached the door. As he crossed the threshold, a wave of stifling heat and a sickening stench took away his breath. He turned on his heel and came out again.

'It is only a scythe,' he said, as indeed it was—a scythe hanging on the wall.

'Ah, a scythe!' and then they all started off again.

'Liberata! Liberata!'

'Are you mad?'

'She must be out of her mind.'

'It is night--we must go home.'

'It is not crying now.'

'Poor little thing-- has it gone to sleep?'

'It is not crying.'

'Bring the cradle indoors now. The air is getting damp. We will help you, Liberata.'

'Poor little soul, is it asleep?'

'It looks like a little corpse; it does not move.'

'Carry the cradle indoors—don't you hear, Liberata?'

'She is out of her mind.'

'Where is the lamp?—Giuseppe will be home directly. Have you not got the lamp?—Giuseppe will be coming back from the lime-kilns.'

'She is mad—she does not say a word.'

'We must go—good-night!'

'Poor, tormented creature!—is it asleep?'

'It is asleep—it is asleep—it does not suffer any more.'

'Lord Jesus, save it!'

'Save us, Lord!'

'We are going—we are going—good-night!'

'Good-night!'

'Good-night!'

III

THE dog continued to bark in the olive-orchard while Ippolita and Giorgio wended their way homewards; but as soon as he recognised them as the guests of his own house, he stopped and came gambolling and leaping towards them.

'Why, it is Giardino!' exclaimed Ippolita, stopping to stroke the poor beast, with whom she had already struck up a friendship. 'He was calling us. It is getting late.'

The moon rose slowly into the silent sky, preceded by a wave of silver light which gradually inundated the blue. The voices of the country died away under its serene influence. To Giorgio, still kept on the alert by an inexplicable fear, the sudden cessation of all these sounds seemed nothing less than uncanny.

'Stop a moment,' he said, with a restraining hand on Ippolita. He strained his ears.

'What are you listening to?'

'It seemed to me——'

They both looked behind them in the direction of the clearing which the olives screened from view. But there was nothing to be heard but the low and regular murmur of the sea in the curve of the little bay below. Above their heads,

a grasshopper clove the air in his flight with the strident sound of a diamond drawn over a pane of glass.

'Don't you think the child was dead?' asked Giorgio, without attempting to hide his emotion. 'It had ceased to cry.'

'That is true,' Ippolita replied; 'and you think that it is dead?'

He did not answer, but resumed his walk through the olives.

'Did you look at the mother?' he went on presently, full of the sombre scene they had just left.

'Dio mio!—Dio mio!'

'And that old woman who touched you on the arm—what a voice! What eyes!'

His words betrayed the unaccountable fear that possessed him, as if he had received some special terrible revelation from the scene he had witnessed, as if life had suddenly manifested itself to him under a weird and menacing aspect, dealing him a wound of which he would always bear the scar.

'Do you know, when I went into the house—there, on the ground behind the door was a dead animal of some kind. It must have been half-putrid. The stench was appalling.'

'What do you tell me!'

'It was a cat or a dog. It was too dark in there to see distinctly.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. There is no doubt about it—there was a dead animal. The smell——'

He shuddered with disgust at the recollection.

'But what for?' asked Ippolita, catching the infection of his horror and loathing.

'Who knows!' They had reached the house, and the dog barked to announce their arrival. Candia was looking out for them, the evening meal spread beneath the oak-tree.

'Oh, signora, how late you are!' cried the good-tempered hostess, smiling at them. 'Where have you been? What will you give me if I guess right? You have been to see Liberata Mannella's child—*Sabato* sia, *Gesù*!'

Afterwards, when they were seated at table, she came back to them desperately anxious to hear and to tell them all she knew.

‘Did you see it, signora? It will never get better—there is no cure. And yet the father and mother have done everything possible to save it.’

What had they not done! Candia told of all the different means they had tried, all the exorcisms they had resorted to. The priest had come, and, after covering the child's head with the end of his stole, had repeated verses from the Gospel. The mother had hung up a wax cross blessed on Ascension day over the door, and had sprinkled the hinges with holy water, and repeated the Credo three times running in a loud voice; she had tied up a handful of salt in a piece of linen and hung it round the neck of her dying child. The father had ‘done the seven nights’—that is, for seven nights he had watched in the dark behind a lighted lantern, attentive to the slightest sound, ready to catch and grapple with the vampire. A single prick with a pin sufficed to make her visible to the human eye. But the seven nights' watch had been fruitless, for the child wasted away and grew more hopelessly feeble from hour to hour. At last, in despair, the father had consulted a wizard, by whose advice he had killed a dog and put the body behind the door. The vampire could not then enter the house till she had counted every hair on its body.

‘You hear?’ said Giorgio to Ippolita.

They were too upset to eat any more, their hearts wrung with pity, appalled by this sudden glimpse of the hideous phantoms that haunted the obscure, stricken lives so closely surrounding their existence of leisure and useless love.

‘*Sabato sia, Gesù!*’ repeated Candia, in pious reference to the burden she bore beneath her heart. ‘And Heaven protect your children, signora! But you are not eating this evening,’ she hastened to remark; ‘you have no appetite. Your heart is sore for that poor, innocent soul. And your husband is not eating either—look!’

‘Do many of them die—like that?’ asked Ippolita.

'Oh,' replied Candia, 'it is a bad country—it swarms with the children of the Evil One; one is never safe from them—*Sabato sia, Gesù!*'

Having repeated the conjuration, she pointed to one of the dishes on the table. 'Do you see those fish? They are from the Trabocco: Turchino brought them.' She lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper. 'Shall I tell you? For nearly a year now, Turchino and the whole family have been under a spell, and they are not freed yet.'

'Who is Turchino?' asked Giorgio, who hung upon the woman's lips, fascinated by these mysterious incidents. 'The man of the Trabocco?'

And he called to mind the clay-coloured face almost devoid of chin, not much bigger than his fist, and with a long-pointed nose like a pike's between two little glittering eyes.

'Yes, signore; look over there—if you have good sight, you will be able to see him. He is fishing to-night by the light of the moon.'

And Candia pointed to the great, cumbrous fishing-machine down on the black rocks, made up of bare trunks of trees, planks, and ropes, looking like the colossal skeleton of some antediluvian animal. You could hear the creaking of the windlass through the motionless air. It was low tide, and from the seaweed left high and dry on the rocks rose a pungent odour which quite eclipsed the soft perfumes of the fruitful hillside.

'Oh, how delicious!' murmured Ippolita, with half-closed eyes, inhaling the exhilarating fragrance, wholly occupied now by the intensity of the new sensation which made her nostrils quiver. 'Do you smell it, Giorgio?'

He was drinking in Candia's words and picturing to himself the mute drama hanging suspended over the sea. Naturally inclined to weirdness and superstition, his imagination clothed the phantoms, evoked by the unsophisticated creature in the calmness of the summer night, with a terrible and illimitable reality. He now, for the first time, caught a confused glimpse of that vast and hitherto unknown mass of human beings, of

all that miserable flesh full of bestial instincts and pain, bent double, toiling in the fields in the sweat of their brows, or stricken down with sickness in the depths of their squalid huts, for ever menaced by the powers of darkness. In the very midst of the sweet and bountiful country which he had specially selected for the scene of his love, he had come upon a spectacle of violent human agitation as though he had suddenly discovered a swarming mass of vermin under the scented locks with which he toyed. He was taken with the same shuddering loathing as on certain other occasions lately, when the brutality of life had suddenly been thrust before him—in the presence of his father, his brother, his poor old half-witted aunt. He suddenly ceased to feel himself alone with his love in the midst of these benign fruits of the earth, under whose rough outer rind he had thought one day to surprise a secret; on the contrary, he now felt himself surrounded and hemmed in by a crowd of unknown creatures, who, while they shared the blind and tenacious vitality of the trees, deep-rooted in the soil, were attached to him by the indestructible bond of species, and were able to communicate their sufferings to him by a look, a gesture, a sob, a groan.

‘Ah yes; this is an evil part of the country,’ said Candia, shaking her head. ‘But the Messiah of the Chapels is coming, and he will purge the earth.’

‘The Messiah?’¹

‘Father!’ called Candia, in the direction of the house, ‘when is the Messiah coming?’

The old man appeared in the doorway. ‘One of these days,’ he replied; and turning towards the crescent-shaped chain of bays that stretched away to Ortona, he indicated by a vague gesture the mystery of the New Saviour on whom the country population had placed their hope and their faith.

‘One of these days he is sure to come.’

¹ The account of the New Messiah is strictly correct. The son of Agapito de Amicis and Maria Raffaella de Philippis, Oreste was born April 27th, 1824, in Cappelle, and died in his bed on the 20th of September 1889.

Anxious to talk about it, the old man approached the table. He looked at his guests with a wavering smile, and asked : 'Do you not know who it is ?'

'Is it perhaps Simplicio ?' said Giorgio, dimly remembering having heard in his childhood of that Simplicio of Sulmona who fell into ecstasies with his eyes fixed on the sun.

'No, signore ; Simplicio is dead. This is Oreste di Cappelle—the New Messiah.' And in glowing language and vivid imagery the old man proceeded to relate the new legend as it had grown in the credulous minds of the peasantry. Oreste, having been a Capuchin friar, had known Simplicio at Sulmona, and from him had learned to read the future from the face of the rising sun. After that he had wandered about the world, had gone to Rome and had an interview with the Pope ; in another country he had spoken to the king. On his return to his birthplace, Cappelle, he had passed seven years in the cemetery in the company of skeletons, wearing a hair shirt, scourging himself day and night. He had preached in the Mother-Church, drawing tears and groans from sinners. Afterwards he had started on a pilgrimage to all the shrines, had stayed thirty days on the Monte di Ancona, twelve days on the Monte San Bernardo, climbing the highest summits bare-headed through the snow. Returned home, he took up his preaching again in the Church, but shortly afterwards, being persecuted and driven out by his enemies, he had taken refuge in the Island of Corsica. There he had become an Apostle, with the resolve to travel over the whole of Italy, and write with his blood on the gates of every city the name of the Virgin. In the character of an Apostle he had come back to his country, proclaiming that he had seen a star in the midst of a bush, and from it had received the Word. Finally, by the inspiration of the Eternal Father, he had assumed the great name of the New Messiah.

After that he had journeyed about the country, clad in a red robe and a blue mantle, with long hair falling over his shoulders and a Nazarene beard. He was followed by his apostles—men who had left the spade and the plough to

dedicate themselves to the triumph of the new faith. In Pantaleone Donadio the spirit of Saint Matthew was revived ; in Antonio Secamiglio the spirit of Saint Peter ; in Maria Clara that of Saint Elizabeth ; and Vincenzo di Giambattista represented the Archangel Michael, and was the messenger of the Messiah.

All these men had ploughed the fields, reaped the corn, clipped the vines, and pressed the olives ; they had driven their cattle to market and bargained over the prices, had led wives to the altar and begotten children, and seen them grow up and flourish and die ; in short, they had led the lives of ordinary country people among their equals. And now they passed through the land following the Messiah, looked upon as divine personages by the same people with whom, only the week before, they had entered into a lawsuit about a measure of oats. They passed transfigured, participating in the divinity of Oreste, invested with his grace. Either in the fields or in their houses they had heard a Voice, and had felt these pure spirits enter suddenly into their sinful bodies. The spirit of Saint John had entered into Giuseppe Coppa ; into Pasquale Basilico the spirit of Saint Zacharias. Women, too, had received the Sign. A woman of Senegallia, the wife of one Augustinone, a tailor of Cappelle, in order to demonstrate the ardour of her faith to the Messiah, had wished to imitate Abraham's sacrifice by setting fire to a straw mattress on which her children were lying. And other women had given similar proofs of their devotion.

So the Chosen One was now going about the country, followed by the apostles and the Maries. The multitude flocked to him from the most distant parts of the coast and the mountains. Every morning at dawn, when he appeared at the door of the house where he had lodged for the night, he found a great expectant crowd waiting for him on their knees. There on the threshold he expounded the Word, received confession, and administered the Sacrament with pieces of bread. For his food he liked eggs cooked with elder-flowers and the heads of wild asparagus ; and, besides that, he ate a mixture

of honey, nuts, and almonds, which he called manna, after the food eaten in the wilderness.

His miracles were past counting. By the simple virtue of his uplifted thumb, first and second fingers, he drove out devils, cured the sick, and raised the dead. If any went to consult him, before they had time to open their mouths he would tell the names of all their relations, explain their family affairs, and bring to light their most hidden secrets. Besides this, he gave news of the souls of the departed, pointed out places where there was buried treasure, and with certain charms in the form of a triangle he drove out melancholy spirits from the heart.

'It is Christ come back to earth,' concluded Cola di Sciam-pagna, in accents of fervent faith. 'He will come here soon—have you not noticed how high the corn is and how flourishing the olives are? Have you not seen how full the vines are?'

'And where is he now?' asked Giorgio gravely, respecting the old man's credulity.

'At Piomba,' he replied, pointing to the far-away coast beyond Ortona and calling up to his guest's mind that corner of the province of Termana which is bathed by the sea; a half-mystic vision of fertile fields, watered by little winding brooks where, under the ceaseless shiver of the poplars, a thread of water babbles over a bed of polished pebbles.

'At Piomba,' continued Cola, after an interval of silence, 'with a single word he stopped the train in the middle of the line. My son saw it. Vito told us—didn't he, Candia?'

Candia confirmed her father's words, and supplied the details of the miraculous occurrence, and how, dressed in his red robe, the Messiah had advanced to meet the train, quietly walking between the lines.

And while they spoke, both Candia and the old man turned continually with eye and gesture towards the distant region, as if the sacred person they were expecting were already visible to them.

'Listen!' broke in Ippolita, rousing Giorgio from his

reverie—an inward vision which grew ever vaster and more distinct. 'Do you hear that?'

She rose and crossed over to the parapet under the acacias, followed by Giorgio.

They both listened.

'It is a band of pilgrims going to the Madonna of Casalbordino,' said Candia.

Under the serene refulgence of the moon a religious chant diffused its slow and monotonous rhythm—male and female voices alternating at set intervals. One half of the choir would sing a verse in a low key, and the other took up the refrain in a higher one, prolonging the cadence indefinitely. It was like the continuous rise and fall of an approaching wave. The procession drew nearer with a rapidity quite out of keeping with the slow time of the chant. The first pilgrims were already in sight at the turn of the path near the bridge to the Trabocco.

'Here they come!' exclaimed Ippolita, excited by the novelty of all she saw and heard. 'Here they come—what a crowd!'

They advanced in a compact body, the contrast between their pace and the time of their chant imparting something grotesque and fantastic to their appearance. They seemed to be impelled along by some superior force outside themselves, while the notes that issued from their throats hung suspended in the luminous air and rang on after they had passed by:—

Evviva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

They passed with a heavy tramp of feet and the sharp, acrid odour of a herd of cattle, packed so closely together that nothing broke the surface of the crowd but the great wooden crosses they held aloft. The men marched in front, and then came the women—much more numerous—with a glint of golden ornaments under their white head-dresses.

Evviva Maria

And He who created her!

When they were quite close their chant burst forth with all the vehemence of a cry, as the voices attacked it in turn. Then it diminished in volume, betraying the fatigue that could only be combated by a continuous and unanimous effort, the initiative in which—for both choruses—always proceeded from a single powerful voice. This voice dominated the others, not only in the intoning of the chant, but at times it hovered high and distinct above the general wave of sound throughout the whole verse, marking a faith more imperative, some unusual and dominating mind amongst that indistinct crowd.

Giorgio noted this, and followed it intently into the diminishing distance as long as his ear could recognise it. It awoke in him an extraordinarily keen sense of the mystic force lying deep-rooted in the grand old indigenous race from which he too had sprung.

They disappeared round a bend of the coast, to reappear on the summit of the promontory, and disappear once more, the chant growing muffled and soft in the nocturnal distance, and at last so faint as to be almost drowned by the slow and even wash of the sea.

On the parapet, with her back against the trunk of an acacia, Ippolita sat silent and motionless, not daring to break in upon the religious reverie in which her lover was evidently plunged.

What could the most brilliant light of day have disclosed to Giorgio that had not already been revealed to him by this simple chant of the night? The scattered images of his fancy, recent and of old date, those still vibrating with new-born life and those buried deep beneath the layers of memory—all gathered themselves together in his mind to form an ideal spectacle far surpassing the most stupendous, the most august reality. His own country and his own people seemed to him transfigured, raised above the narrow limits of time, legendary and formidable of aspect, pregnant with eternal and nameless mystery. A mountain like a great round unhewn block and covered with perpetual snows rose up in the centre, its crescent

bays and its promontories consecrated to the olive bathed by a treacherous and sullen sea with sails upon it the colour of mourning and of flame. Paths wide as rivers, verdant with grass, strewn with bare rocks, and showing here and there traces of gigantic remains, descended from the heights to conduct the migrations of the flocks into the fertile plains below. Religious rites, dead and forgotten elsewhere, survived here; incomprehensible symbols of powers brought low long centuries ago existed here intact; customs of a primitive race that had vanished for ever from the face of the earth lived on here and were handed down unaltered from generation to generation; fashions, sumptuous but strange and purposeless, were here preserved as a witness to the nobility and beauty of an anterior life. Long cavalcades of horses passed laden with grain and bestriden by devotees crowned with garlands of wheat, who laid their cereal offerings at the foot of some statue. Maidens with baskets of grain on their heads came down the path, leading a she-ass with panniers full of corn which they were taking to the altar as an offering, singing as they went. Men and youths, crowned with roses and pink berries, went on a pilgrimage to a rock which bore the imprint of a foot. A white ox, fattened for a year on an abundant fodder, covered with crimson trappings and bestriden by a boy, advanced with pomp between the lines of flags and wax tapers. On the threshold of the temple he knelt, amidst the plaudits of the people. At the festivals, the riverside population twined bryony round their heads and passed over the water at night with songs and music, and bearing leafy boughs in their hands. In the meadows at dawn maidens bathed their faces, hands, and feet in dew for a vow. On the mountains and in the plains the first sunrise of the spring was greeted with antique hymns, the clash of metal, shouts and dances. Over the whole country, men, women, and children searched for the first serpents that awakened from their lethargic winter sleep, caught them alive, and, encircling their necks and arms with them, presented themselves thus;

adorned before their tutelary deity, who then gave them immunity from venomous bites. On the sunny hillsides young husbandmen with a couple of oxen harnessed to their ploughs competed, in presence of their elders, as to who should trace the straightest furrow from the top of the hill to the plain below, and the judge awarded a prize to the successful competitor, while his father, with tears of pride, opened his arms to his victorious son. Thus, in every ceremony, every pomp, in their work and in their pastime, at times of birth and love and marriage and death, in everything there was some outward and visible agricultural symbol—everywhere was represented and venerated the great Genetrix Earth, from whose bosom fountains flowed of bounty and of innocent joy. The women of the family assembled at the house of the newly wedded, carrying on their heads a basket of corn, and on the corn a loaf of bread, and on the bread a flower. They entered one by one and scattered a handful of this auspicious grain on the head of the happy bride. At the foot of the bed of a dying person, when the agony grew too prolonged, two of his nearest relatives placed a plough, which had the double virtue of keeping off evil spirits and hastening death. Both the implements and the fruits of the earth were full of a high significance and power. A profound and inborn love of the mysterious led them to invest every object that surrounded them with active properties, benevolent or malign, of good or evil omen, participating in every vicissitude of fortune by some manifest or occult action. A leaf of stinging nettle pressed upon the bare arm revealed love or indifference; a mortar placed upon the window-sill lured back the straying pigeons; the heart of a swallow, if eaten, imparted wisdom. Mystery intervened at every point, enveloped and embraced every form of existence, and the supernatural dominated and absorbed the ordinary, creating innumerable and imperishable phantoms which peopled the fields, inhabited the dwellings, filled the sky, and troubled the waters. Mystery and rhythm—those two essential elements of every cult—were present

everywhere. Men and women continually poured out their hearts in song, accompanied their every action, whether indoors or out, by song, and celebrated with songs both the beginning and the end of life. Round the cradle and round the bier the *mélodie* rose and fell in slow reiteration, infinitely ancient, as old perhaps as the race to whose profound melancholy it testified. Sad, solemn, fixed in immutable measure, they seemed the fragments of hymns belonging to an immemorial liturgy, and to have survived the destruction of some grand primordial myth. They were not numerous, but so dominating that the new measures were powerless to combat or displace them. They were handed down from generation to generation, as much an integral part of the structure of the race and the country, as the mountain and the rivers, as the customs, vices, virtues, and beliefs.

In the midst of this country and these people, there now appeared the New Messiah, whose life and miracles the old peasant had related to them. What was this man? An ascetic, simple-minded and harmless, like Simplicio, who worshipped the sun, or an astute impostor intent on drawing his own profit out of the credulity of the devout? Who was this man, who, from the banks of a little river, was able to sway multitudes far and near by the sole magic of his name—could induce mothers to abandon their children, and call up visions and voices from the unseen world in the souls of the rudest men?

And before his mind's eye Giorgio saw once more the figure of Oreste clothed in his red robe, wandering along by the winding river, where, under the ceaseless shiver of the poplars, a little thread of water babbled over the polished pebbles.

Mystery and rhythm lay over all. Close by, on the whitening beach, the sea breathed at regular intervals, but during the pauses one heard the faintly graduated ripple of the waves as they touched the shore at the more distant points along the coast. Thrown back, no doubt, by some

echoing cavity, the chant of the pilgrims reached them once more, and then died away. In the direction of the Vasto d'Aimone the sky was full of summer lightning flashing red across the white purity of the moonlight. Leaning against the tree, Ippolita sat and dreamed, her eyes fixed upon the dazzling display.

She had not made a single movement. Prolonged immobility in one position was no unusual thing with her, and sometimes assumed an almost cataleptic appearance that was quite alarming. At such times she lost the youthful and benign aspect which the beasts and the plants knew so well, and became a taciturn and indomitable creature, in whom were concentrated all the isolating and destructive qualities of love and passion. The three divine points of her beauty—her brow, her eyes, and her mouth—had perhaps never attained to such a degree of intensity as symbols of the principle of the fascination of the 'eternal feminine.' The serenity of the night seemed favourable to this sublimation of her form, setting free the true and ideal essence of her being, and permitting her lover to see her, not with the eyes of the flesh but of the spirit. The moonlit summer night—so full of dreams and stars and the melodious accents of the sea—seemed the most natural canvas for this regal picture. Just as the shadow sometimes exaggerates beyond measure the body which projects it, so on the infinite grandeur of this background the fatality of love made Ippolita appear taller and more tragic to the beholder, whose prescience grew from moment to moment keener and more terrible. Was it not the identical woman who from that place and with that same immobility had watched the single white sail on the stagnant waters? It was she; and now, notwithstanding the night which stripped her person of all harsh reality, he felt the same hatred stir in him under the sentiment she excited—that mortal antagonism of the sexes which is at the root of all love, and, hidden or patent, underlies its every expression, from the first glance to the last extremity of aversion.

'She therefore is the Arch-Enemy,' he mused. 'As long as

she lives—as long as she can exercise her power over me—she will prevent me setting my foot upon the threshold that I see before me. And how am I to recuperate my strength if the greater part of me is in the hands of this woman? In vain for me to aspire to a new world, a new life; as long as love endures, so long will the axis of the world rest upon a single human being and all life be enclosed with a narrow circle. To rise up and conquer, I must be free of love—I must deliver myself from the Enemy.'

Once again he imagined her dead. 'In death she would be a subject for reverie, a pure ideal. From a precarious and imperfect existence she would enter into one complete and secure, leaving behind her for ever all her carnal infirmities and lusts. Destroy in order to possess. To him who seeks the Absolute in love no other way is open.'

Ippolita gave a sudden violent shudder.

'Some one is walking over my grave,' she said with a smile, alluding to the popular superstition. But her lover, struck by the singular coincidence, could not repress an instinctive start of surprise and fear. 'Can she have *felt* my thought?'

A sudden furious barking from the dog made them both start to their feet.

'Who can it be?' said Ippolita anxiously.

The dog barked more angrily than before in the direction of the olive-orchard at the entrance to the path. Candia and her father came out of their house.

'Who is it?' repeated Ippolita nervously.

'Who can it possibly be?' said the old man, peering into the gloom.

A human voice came from among the olives, a voice that sobbed and implored. Then an indistinct shape appeared, which Candia instantly recognised.

'Liberata!'

On her head the mother carried a cradle covered with a black cloth. She walked upright, rigid, without turning to right or left, straight on, sphinx-like and silent, like some dreadful somnambulist driven blindly on to an unknown goal.

A man followed after her, bareheaded, beside himself, sobbing, imploring, calling her by name, writhing, beating his breast with his clenched hands, or burying them in his hair with gestures of frantic despair.

'Liberata! Liberata! Listen to me—listen to me, I say! Come home! O Dio! O Dio!' he cried between his sobs, grotesque and miserable, dragging himself after his wife, who turned a deaf ear to his entreaties.

'Where are you going? What has come to you? Liberata! Listen to me! O Dio, Dio!' He implored her to stop, to turn back, stretching out his hands with frenzied gestures; but he did not touch her, as if prevented by some mysterious power, or as if by some sorcery the woman had become intangible.

Candia, too, neither went to meet her nor barred her path.

'What is it, Giuseppe? What has happened?' she asked of the husband.

He answered with a sign indicative of madness, reminding Giorgio and Ippolita of the words of the women: 'She is mad; she is dumb, signora. For three days she has not spoken; she has gone out of her mind.'

'Dead?' whispered Candia, pointing to the covered cradle.

The man wept uncontrolled. Both Giorgio and Ippolita remembered how the women had said, 'Poor little thing, it has stopped crying. Is it asleep? It looks like a corpse—it does not move. It is asleep—it is asleep—it has no more pain.'

'Liberata!' screamed Candia with all the force of her lungs, trying to startle the woman out of her impassive state. 'Liberata, where are you going?'

But she did not touch her or seek to impede her progress.

Then they fell silent and watched her. The mother proceeded on her way, straight on, never turning to right or left, tall and rigid, with tearless dilated eyes—her mouth tightly closed as if sealed by a vow of perpetual silence and deprived of breath. The cradle, now transformed into a coffin, swayed

upon her head, and the husband's lamentations fell into a rhythmic measure that sounded almost like a monody.

The tragic couple crossed the court and descended the pathway which had so recently been trodden by the feet of the pilgrims, and where the devout spirit of their hymn seemed still to float in the air.

And the lovers, their hearts filled with pity and horror, watched the funereal figure of the mother pass onwards into the night towards the lurid crater of the lightning.

IV

It was now no longer Ippolita, but Giorgio, who proposed the long excursions and explorations. Condemned 'continually to wait on life,' his present idea was to go to meet it, to find and pluck it from the realities of the natural world. With a vain and fictitious curiosity, he busied himself with things which—hardly sufficing to ruffle the surface of the soul—were entirely ineffectual in penetrating and stirring up its depths. He strove to discover between his mind and certain objects relations which did not exist, and he endeavoured to shake off that ingrained indifference which for so long had rendered him impervious to any agitation not proceeding from himself. Calling up his keenest powers of observation, he did his best to find some striking accordance between his own soul and surrounding Nature, that thereby he might reconcile himself finally with her and remain true to her eternally.

But he strove in vain to revive that extraordinary emotion which, more than once, had exalted him so marvellously in the first days of his sojourn at the Hermitage before Ippolita joined him; or the delicious flutterings of that first day when he seemed actually to feel the sunshine in his heart; or the enthralling melancholy of his first solitary wanderings; or the unlooked-for and exquisite blitheness of the May morning, and Favetta's song in the dewy fragrance of the golden broom. Man cast his tragic shadow over earth and sea. Poverty, sickness, madness, and the horror and terror of death lay in wait for him

and dogged his footsteps. The hot breath of fanaticism ran over the country from one end to the other. Day and night, far or near, the religious chants never ceased their monotonous drone. The Messiah was expected, and the very poppies in the corn kept alive the image of his crimson robe.

Every form of vegetable life was consecrated by some pious legend. The story of the Gospel wound itself round every tree and entwined itself among the branches. In the lap of the Madonna flying from the pursuit of the Pharisees, the Infant Jesus changed himself into a heap of corn; hidden in the baking pan, he caused the bread to rise and to become inexhaustible. A curse lay upon the dry and prickly lupins, because they had torn the tender feet of the Virgin, but the flax was blessed for having dazzled the eyes of the Pharisees by its waving. Thrice blessed too was the olive, because it had opened its trunk as a refuge to the Holy Family and lighted them with its pure oil. The juniper had effectually concealed the Holy Infant, and was therefore blessed; and blessed the laurel because it grows upon the soil watered by the stream wherein the Son of God was bathed.

How escape the fascination of the mystery which extended itself to every created thing, transforming them into signs and emblems of another life?

Troubled and unsettled by the suggestive thoughts which roused all his mystical tendencies, Giorgio said to himself: 'Would that I possessed true faith, the faith which enabled Saint Teresa to see the actual Presence in the Host!' And this was no vain or momentary desire, but a profound and fervid aspiration from the depths of his soul; for he felt that here, at last, was the key to all his misery and his weakness. Like Demetrio Aurispa, he was an ascetic without a God. Demetrio was his real father. By a singular coincidence of names this spiritual paternity seemed consecrated by the inscription which surrounded the marvellous 'ostensorio,' the gift of his ancestors, and preserved in the Cathedral at Guardiagrele:—

'Ego Demetrius Aurispa Et Unicus Georgius Filius Meus

*Donatus Istud Tabernaculum Ecclesiæ S. M. de Guardia
Quod Factum Est per Manus Abbatis Joannis Castorii De
Guardia Archipresbyteri ad Usus Eucharistiæ.*

‘Nicolaus Andræ de Guardia me fecit A.D. MCCCCXIII.’

Both of them, in effect, creatures of high intelligence and sentiment, had the hereditary mysticism of the house of Aurispa; both possessed the religious spirit, and were much addicted to living in a world of symbols, in a heaven of pure abstraction. Both loved the ceremonial of the Latin Church, the music, the smell of incense, all the extreme and refined sensuousness of the cult. But they had lost their faith, they bowed the knee before a deserted altar.

Their unhappy state arose therefore from the exigencies of their metaphysical mind, which the perpetual presence of an implacable doubt forbade them to expand, to satisfy or to rest in peace in the Divine arms. Being by nature unfitted to take up and sustain the struggle for existence, they had recognised the necessity of retirement from it. But how could the man who was an exile from life endure the seclusion of a cell, in which there was no sign of the Almighty? Voluntary seclusion is the supreme proof either of humility or of the sovereign quality of the soul, for it can only be endured by those who have renounced all for God, or by those the strength of whose souls is such as to form the unassailable basis of a world.

One of the two, recognising, of a sudden perhaps, that the violence of his pain was beginning to exceed his powers of resistance, had attempted to transform himself by death into a higher being, and had flung himself into the Unknown, from whence he looked down upon the survivor with inscrutable eyes—*Ego Demetrius Aurispa et unicus Georgius filius meus . . .*

Therefore, in his moments of lucid thought, Giorgio fully realised that under no circumstances whatever would he have succeeded in carrying out the type of exuberant life, the ‘Dionysian’ ideal of which he had caught a passing glimpse that night under the oak, when he tasted the warm new bread

out of the hand of a young and joyous woman. He recognised the fact that his intellectual and moral faculties were too disproportionate ever to find a proper balance. He realised that far from struggling to regain full and undivided possession of the 'Ego,' he must renounce that Ego altogether. For these two courses alone lay open to him: either to follow Demetrio's example or to dedicate himself to Heaven.

This last course was the most seductive. In considering it, he disregarded for the moment all its unfavourable aspects and the immediate obstacles to carrying it out, driven by his irresistible mania for making a complete structure out of his illusions and dwelling in it, if only for an hour. Here, upon his native soil, did not its ardent faith envelop him more warmly than the heat of its sun? Was it not the purest Christian blood that flowed in his veins? Did not the ascetic ideal run through all the branches of his race, from that noble donor Demetrius down to the poor miserable creature named Gioconda? Why should not that ideal be regenerated in him, uplift him to unknown heights, permit him to touch the climax of human ecstasy in God? Everything in him was ready to consummate the event. He possessed all the necessary qualities of an ascetic—the contemplative spirit, a love of the symbolical and the allegorical, the faculty of abstraction, an extreme sensibility to the suggestiveness of all he saw or heard, an organic tendency towards visions and hallucinations. There was but one thing wanting—that greatest thing of all, which was perhaps not dead in him but only slumbered—faith, the faith of his ancestor, the donor of the monstrance, the ancient faith of his fathers who came down from the mountain-tops to sing hymns of praise along the sea-shore.

But how to awaken it? How resuscitate it? No artifice would avail. He must wait for a sudden flash, some unexpected upheaval. Perhaps, like the disciples of Oreste, he would see a flame or hear a Voice in the midst of the field at a turning in the road.

The figure of Oreste rose up before him in the red tunic, advancing along the side of the winding brook, under the

ceaseless tremor of the poplars, and he imagined a meeting and a colloquy between them. It would be at midday on the hillside, close by a field of wheat. Oreste would be a man of great simplicity and unpretentious, and his smile, as he spoke, of virginal purity, his teeth white as the jasmine; the continuous murmur of the tide on the rocks at the foot of the promontory sounding like chords from a distant organ. But behind the benignly mild figure of the Messiah the poppies blazed out through the gold of the ripe corn—the vehement symbol of desire. . . .

‘Desire,’ mused Giorgio, recalled thus to his mistress and the depressing physical influence of his love—‘who will destroy desire?’ And he thought of the admonitions of Ecclesiastes—‘*Non des mulieri potestatem animæ tuæ. A muliere initium factum est peccati, et per illam omnes morimur. . . . A carnibus tuis absconde illam.*’ . . .

He had a vision of how in the sacred dawn of time, in a delicious garden, the first man, sorrowful and lonely, took to his heart the first woman, and she became the scourge of the world, scattering pain and death around her. But desire, regarded as a sin, seemed to him more regal and more perturbing. He could imagine no rapture more intense than the frenzied embraces to which the martyrs of the early Church abandoned themselves in the prisons where they awaited death. And he pictured to himself women mad with terror and with love lifting faces bathed in silent tears to be kissed.

But what was this sighing after faith and redemption but a longing for fresh tremors and convulsions, for raptures hitherto unknown? To transgress the law and obtain pardon, commit the sin and confess with tears, acknowledge the most trifling peccadilloes and most ordinary vices, exaggerating them purposely, incessantly putting his sick soul and his sick body into the hands of the merciful Physician; was there not something altogether new to him in the fascination of all these things?

From the very beginning his passion had been impregnated with a pious perfume of incense and violets. He thought of the Epiphany of Love in the deserted oratory in the Via

Belsiana :—the little secluded chapel full of blue twilight, a chorus of girls surrounding the curved platform like a garland of flowers ; below them an orchestra with stringed instruments standing at their white deal music-desks, and all around in carved oak seats the sparse audience, almost all of them white-haired and bald. The conductor marked the time, and a pious perfume of vanished incense and violets mingled with the music of Sebastian Bach.

He thought too of Orvieto, the well-remembered Guelph city—the closed windows, the grass growing in the narrow grey streets, a friar crossing a square, a priest descending from a black carriage at the door of a hospital with a decrepit old servant at the door, a tower against the wet white sky, a clock slowly striking the hour, and suddenly, at the end of a street, a miracle—the Duomo ! Had he not dreamed of taking refuge on the summit of that monastery-crowned rock ? had he not more than once longed sincerely for that silence, that peace ? And he was seized once more with a nostalgic yearning for shadow and silence, for some hidden and solitary retreat where the most fragile flowers of fancy might blow, the subtle thought, the most delicate and evanescent desires. This blaze of sunshine, these hard distinct outlines, were almost offensive to him : and as the image of splashing fountains haunts the mind of the man thirsting in the desert, so he was fascinated by the thought of the cool shade and seclusion of a nave in a Roman church.

The call of the church bells did not reach the Hermitage, or only on rare occasions when the wind was in a particular quarter. The church of the town was too far away, vulgar perhaps, certainly without beauty or tradition of antiquity. What he wanted was a retreat near at hand and dignified, where his mysticism could find æsthetic nourishment, as in that deep marble urn which contains the Dantesque visions of Lucca Signorelli.

He recalled the Abbey of San Clementi at Casauria which he had seen once long ago in his boyhood, during one of his expeditions with Demetrio. Like all his recollections that were

connected with his uncle, this one was as clear and distinct as if it had happened yesterday. He and Demetrio had gone down the great sheep-road to the Abbey hidden behind the trees. A profound calm reigned over the grand and lonely country and on the broad grassy pathway strewn with stones, deserted and uneven, with traces of gigantic remains, their origin lost in the mystery of the distant and sacred mountains. A sense of primæval sanctity seemed to linger in the air, as if the grass and stones had been but newly trodden by some long migration of patriarchal flocks seeking fresh pastures on the seaboard. Below them in the plain they caught sight of the basilica, almost a ruin. The ground all about it was encumbered with rubbish and undergrowth; fragments of sculptured stone were heaped against the pillars, wild creepers waved from every crevice, recent constructions of brick and mortar closed the wide apertures of the lateral arcades, the doors were falling in. A band of pilgrims were taking their midday sleep in the outer court under the noble portico erected by Leo the Magnificent. But the three arches which remained intact sprang out of their different capitals with such supreme grace, and the September sunshine cast such a jewel-like tone over the fair marble, that both he and Demetrio felt they were in the presence of sovereign beauty. And in truth, the closer they examined it the more clear and pure did the complex harmony of the lines become, and by degrees they realised that this bold and unique combination of round, pointed, and horse-shoe arches, the infinite variety of moulding, bosses, lozenges, palms, rosettes, leaves, allegorical monsters—all, both great and little, with one accord obeyed a strict and undeviating law of rhythmical grace. And the weird force of that rhythm was so great that it ended by triumphing over all the discordant surroundings, and called up a dreamlike vision of the entire edifice, such as it had risen up in the twelfth century on the fertile island encircled and nourished by a mighty river. They both carried that vision away with them. It was September, and in the dying summer the aspect of the country all around was one of mingled grace and austerity which seemed to cor-

respond in some occult way with the spirit of the Christian edifice. Two circles girdled the tranquil valley: the first formed of hills all covered with vines and olives, the second of bare and jagged rocks, reminding Demetrio of the obscure sentiment animating the picture of Leonardo, out of which, from a background of desolate rocks, an alluringly beautiful woman smiles at you. And as if to accentuate the enigma presented to their minds, a song rose from some far-away vineyard ushering in the early vintage, and behind them responded the litany of the pilgrims as they went on their onward way. The two chants—the sacred and the profane—melted into one another.

Fascinated by this reminiscence, the survivor of the two had but the one chimærical desire: to return there, to see the basilica once more, take up his abode there in order to rescue it from decay, restore it to its pristine beauty, reinstate its sumptuous ritual, and, after this long period of oblivion and neglect, renew the '*Chronicon Casauriense*.' Here was surely, in point of fact, the most glorious temple in all the Abbruzzi, built upon an island in the parent stream, the ancient seat of temporal and spiritual power, the central point of a rich and varied activity for a long line of centuries. The Clementine spirit still brooded over it as it had revealed itself to Giorgio and his uncle on that afternoon long ago in the divine harmony expressed in all those concurrent lines.

'We might try a change of place,' he remarked to Ippolita. 'Do you remember our dream of Orvieto?'

'Oh yes!' she cried; 'that city of convents where you were going to take me.'

'I want to take you to a deserted abbey more solitary still than our Hermitage, noble as a cathedral, full of memories of the remotest past; where there is a great candelabra of white marble, a flowerlike marvel of art created by a nameless sculptor. Standing straight and erect upon that candelabra, your face shall illumine the meditations of my soul.' He smiled at the lyric extravagance of the phrase, but dwelt in thought upon the fair image it evoked. As for her, with that

ingenious egotism and that all-powerful animalism which forms the basis of the feminine character, nothing intoxicated her like evanescent poetical homage such as this. It was her joy and pride to appear idealised in her lover's eyes as on that first evening in the faint blue spring twilight of the street, or again in the secluded oratory amidst religious music and the scent of vanished fragrance, or on the wild pathway strewn with blossoming broom.

'When shall we go?' she asked in her most artless voice.

'Shall we say to-morrow?'

'Let it be to-morrow.'

'Take care; if you go up there you will not be able to come down again.'

'What does that matter? I shall look at you.'

'You will burn and consume away like a taper.'

'I shall serve you as a light.'

'You will serve to light my funeral then.' The words were lightly spoken, but nevertheless, with his wonted intensity of imagination, he was already busily weaving a mystic story out of them. After long years of erring through the mazes of sin and lust, repentance had come upon him. Initiated by this woman into all the arts that could most excite concupiscence, he now implored the divine compassion to have pity upon the insupportable misery of this carnal love. 'Have compassion upon me, as much for the joys of the past, as the sufferings of the present. Ah, God, let me have strength to accomplish the sacrifice in Thy name!' And he fled seeking a refuge of safety, followed by his mistress; and at last they found it, and there upon the threshold the miracle was accomplished, inasmuch as there the Corruptrice, the implacable Enemy, the Rose of Hell cast from her all her sin like a mantle, and became pure and stainless, and fit to follow her lover to the sacrificial altar. Become luminous herself, she lit up the sacred gloom. On the summit of the marble candelabra, empty for centuries, she stood and burned in the inextinguishable and silent flame of her love. 'Silent and erect upon the candelabra, your face shall illumine the meditations

of my soul, even unto death.' And she would burn with an inward fire, never asking for anything to feed the flame, never claiming any return from the beloved. *Amabat amare*: renouncing for ever all possession, more transcendent in her sovereign purity than God Himself, for though God loves His creatures He will be loved in return, and woe to him who refuses! Hers was the stylitic love—solitary, sublime, feeding on itself alone. She had felt that part of her substance fall away from her that formed a barrier to her complete self-offering—nothing of earthly or impure remained. Her body was transformed into an element, subtle, translucent, incorruptible; her senses melting into one supreme rapture. Raised on the summit of the marvellous pedestal, she burned and rejoiced in her own splendour as a flame that is conscious of its own luminous vitality.

Ippolita listened intently. 'Do you hear?' she said—'another procession. To-morrow is the Vigil.'

At daybreak and at midday, in the evening and the night, the air resounded incessantly with hymns and chanting. One procession followed on the heels of another, under the sun and under the moon, all bound for one goal, celebrating one name, under the vehement impulse of one passion—all miserable and dreadful of aspect, abandoning the sick and dying on the road; never stopping, sweeping aside every obstacle that hindered their advance towards that point where they would find the balm for all their ills, the promise of fulfilment to all their hopes. On, on they marched, never pausing, watering with their own sweat the print of their footsteps in the endless dust.

Was it possible that the enormous amount of force necessary to stir and attract these masses of gross humanity could radiate from a simple image? About four hundred years before, an aged septuagenarian had had a vision of Our Lady of Compassion in a tree in the midst of a field devastated by the hail, and every year since then, on the anniversary of the apparition, the whole population of the mountains and the sea-coast had journeyed to the sacred spot to ask for pity on their sufferings.

Ippolita had heard the legend already from Candia, and for some days past had nourished a secret desire to visit the shrine. The predominating influence of love and the pleasures of the senses had tended to stifle the spirit of religion in her ; but Roman by race, and, what is more, born in the Trastevere, and brought up in one of those middle-class families in which, by immemorial tradition, the key of conscience is always in the hands of a priest, she was ultra-Catholic, devoted to all the external ritual of the Church, and subject to periodical fits of religious fervour.

‘In the meantime,’ she suggested, ‘supposing we too went to Casalbordino? To-morrow is the Vigil. Shall we go? It would be something quite new for you ; we could take the old man with us.’

Giorgio consented ; Ippolita’s desire coincided with his own. It was a necessary part of his scheme that he should follow this great stream, make one of this agglomeration of uncivilised humanity, try the effect of physical contact with the lower strata of his race, those dense and unchanging layers in which the primitive imprints were preserved almost intact.

‘We will start to-morrow,’ he answered, seized by a sort of anxiety for departure as he heard a fresh band approaching.

Shuddering with horror, Ippolita related from Candia’s account some of the horrible tortures the pilgrims inflicted on themselves in accomplishment of a vow. And as the chant drew nearer, a breath of tragedy seemed to pass over both their souls.

They were on the hillside, and it was night. The moon was mounting into the sky ; a dewy freshness rose from the surrounding masses of vegetation, still vibrating from the thunderstorm of the afternoon. A tear hung on every leaf, the drops glittering like diamonds in the soft refulgence of the moon and transfiguring the forest. Giorgio, knocking accidentally against a little tree, brought down a shower of starry drops from the branches all over Ippolita.

She gave a little scream, and then began to laugh.

'Ah, traitor!' she exclaimed, fancying that Giorgio had meant to startle her by this sudden shower-bath; and she instantly prepared for reprisals.

Under her vigorous shaking the trees and bushes showered down their liquid gems; while through the crisp pattering of the drops, Ippolita's laughter rang out at intervals here and there upon the hillside. And Giorgio laughed responsive, forgetful suddenly of all his phantasms, allowing himself to be carried away and penetrated by the gay seductiveness of youth and the vivifying freshness of night, which drew out all the fragrance of the earth. He tried to be the first to reach a tree most heavily laden with moisture, while she, trying to outstrip him, ran swiftly and sure of foot down the slippery incline. They nearly always arrived at the tree at the same moment, both shaking it and receiving the same shower. Under the moving shadows of the foliage, Ippolita's teeth and the whites of her eyes gleamed fitfully, while tiny drops like diamond dust glittered on the stray curls on her forehead, on her cheeks and her lips, even on her eyelashes, and twinkled with the tremor of her laughter.

'Ah, witch!' cried Giorgio, letting go the tree and clasping the woman in his arms, who suddenly appeared to him again in all the mysterious splendour of nocturnal beauty.

And he began raining kisses all over her face, feeling it cool and dewy under his lips like a fruit just freshly plucked.

'There—there—there,' he murmured, as he pressed the kisses on her mouth, her cheeks, her eyes, her brow, her throat, as insatiable as if it were all quite new to him. And under his kisses she assumed that half-ecstatic aspect which was habitual to her when she felt that her lover had one of his moments of real rapture. At such times she seemed intent on exhaling out of the depths of her soul the sweetest and most poignant fragrance of love to increase his intoxication till it reached positive pain.

'There——' he stopped; he had attained the extreme limit of sensation, and could bear no more.

They fell silent, and, taking each other by the hand,

returned homewards, cutting across the fields, as they had lost the path in their wild race. An indefinable lassitude and melancholy took possession of them. Giorgio felt bewildered and annoyed. Thus, at the end of a day of perturbation and unrest, passed in the close company of shadowy phantoms, life had been able to offer him all in a moment, like a furtively beckoning hand in the gloaming, a fresh sensation, something new, and yet real and profound.

'Look!' broke in Ippolita with a start of admiration. It was as if she offered him an illustration of his unspoken thought.

There in the white moonlight stood a vine. The encircling stems transformed each slender supporting stick into a thyrus, and the dripping leaves, all transparent against the luminous background, showing a mass of delicately interlaced veining in the absolute immobility of mineral things, as if formed of crystal and jade, indescribably fragile and ephemeral, seemed not to be of this earth, nor to have any communion with the surrounding objects, but to be the last visible fragment of an allegorical world, conceived by a necromancer, and on the point of vanishing.

And spontaneously there occurred to Giorgio's mind that verse in the Cantic:—

Vinea mea coram est.

V¹

SINCE daybreak flood after flood of people had poured out of the trains at Casalbordino. They were people from all the little towns and hamlets round about, and bands of peasants from the remotest villages, who either could not or would not make the pilgrimage on foot. They precipitated themselves out of the carriages, heaped themselves against the barrier at the exit from the station, shouted and gesticulated and hustled

¹ It may be mentioned here that *The Triumph of Death* began to appear in the *Mattino* of Naples in February 1893, whereas Zola's *Lourdes* did not begin in the *GU Blas* till April 1894.

one another in their fight for a place in the various conveyances amidst the cracking of whips and the jingling of bells; or else they ranged themselves in long lines behind a crucifix, and as the procession set itself in motion on the dusky road they struck up a hymn.

Bewildered by the turmoil, Giorgio and Ippolita instinctively turned towards the sea, which was close by, to let the crowd disperse. A field of hemp waved tranquilly against the background of blue-green waters. The sails gleamed like tongues of fire upon the clear horizon.

'Have you the courage to go on?' Giorgio asked his companion. 'I am afraid it will be too fatiguing for you.'

'Do not fear,' she replied. 'I am very strong. And besides, you must go through some discomfort if you want to earn a boon.'

'Are you going to ask for one?' he asked, smiling.

'Yes—just one.'

'But are we not in mortal sin?'

'Alas, that is true.'

'Well, then——?'

'I shall ask, all the same.'

They had taken old Cola with them to act as guide, he knowing the country and the ways of the place well. As soon as the crowd cleared out of the station, they entered a carriage and set off at a gallop with a great jingle of bells. The horses were gaily bedizened as if for a show, and the driver wore a peacock's feather in his cap, and cracked his whip continuously to a running accompaniment of hoarse shouts.

'How long shall we be getting there?' asked Ippolita, who felt as impatient and anxious to reach the shrine as if the day held the accomplishment of some great event for her.

'Half an hour at most,' answered Cola.

'Is the church old?'

'No, signora; I can remember when there was no church there at all. Fifty years ago there was only a tiny chapel.' He drew from his pocket a folded leaflet, spread it out and

handed it to Giorgio. 'There,' he said, 'read that; there is the story.'

It was a picture with the legend printed underneath. The Virgin, surrounded by a choir of angels, hovered over an olive-tree, at the foot of which an old man knelt in adoration. The name of the old man was Alessandro Muzio, and the story ran, that on the evening of the 10th of June, in the year of our Lord 1527, being the Sunday of Pentecost, a terrible hurricane swept over Casalbordino and devastated the vineyards, the cornfields, and the olives. The following morning, an old man of Pollutri, Alessandro Muzio, who owned a field of wheat at the Piano del Lago, went out to look at it. His heart was wrung with anguish at the ruin that everywhere met his eyes, but, nevertheless, in his profound humility he praised the justice of God. Deeply devoted to the worship of the Virgin, and reciting the rosary as he walked along, he heard, as he reached the end of the valley, the sound of the bell which announced the elevation of the Host. He instantly fell upon his knees and gathered his whole soul together in prayer. And while he prayed, he suddenly saw himself surrounded by a great light, exceeding that of the sun, and in it there appeared our Lady of Pity, all draped in blue, who addressed him with gracious sweetness: 'Go and tell it abroad—say that repentance shall have its reward—let a temple be raised on this spot, and there I will dispense my blessings. Go to your field and you will find it unharmed.' She vanished with her company of angels, and the old man arising and going to his field found it unharmed. He immediately ran to Pollutri, presented himself before the priest, Mariario d'Iddone, and related the miracle. In a moment the news had spread over the whole country-side; everybody hurried to the sacred spot, saw the earth dry all round the tree, saw the flourishing wheat-field, recognised the miracle that had been performed, and shed tears of penitence and joy.

Not long afterwards the Vicar of Arabona laid the first stone of the chapel, the builders of the edifice being Geronimo di Geronimo and Giovanni Fatalone, both of Casalbordino.

Over the altar they hung a painting of the Virgin with the aged Alessandro kneeling before her in adoration.

The story was simple and commonplace, like a hundred others founded on a miracle. From that time onwards it was in the name of the Madonna of Casalbordino that the ships on that coast were saved from the tempest, the fields from hail, the travellers from thieves, the sick from death. Set up in the midst of a needy and harassed population, the sacred Image was an inexhaustible source of blessing.

'This Madonna performs more miracles than any other in the world,' said Cola di Sciampagna, kissing the sacred page before replacing it in his bosom. 'They say that another one has risen up somewhere in the "Regno," but ours will get the best of it—never fear! Ours must always be first.'

His words and gestures revealed that sectarian fanaticism which excites the blood of all image-worshippers, and in the Abruzzi sometimes drives the population into savage feuds over the supremacy of an idol. Like the rest of his companions in faith, the old man had no conception of a divine being apart from the Image, and it was in that Image that he saw and adored the real presence of the celestial personage. To them the Image on the altar was as much alive as a creature of flesh and blood—it breathed and smiled, fluttered its eyelids, bent its brow, and made signs with its hands. It was the same everywhere—all the sacred statues, whether of wood, wax, bronze, or silver, lived and breathed and had their being, let their material be precious or common. If it happened to them to grow old or get broken or worn out by the lapse of time, they did not make way for new statues without every sign of resentment and disgust. A fragment of a bust, become irrecongnisable and mixed with firewood, had sent up a great spurt of blood under the hatchet, and uttered words of menace and reproach. Another one, cut up and fitted into the sides of a water-butt, had given evidence of its supernatural quality by causing the reflection of its former shape to appear intact on the surface of the water.

'Ohé, Aligi!' shouted the old man to a man who was

walking painfully by the side of the road in the suffocating dust—‘Ohé!’ Then turning to his guests, he explained: ‘He is a good Christian and from our part of the country. He has been cured, and is taking a votive offering. Look, signora, he is quite out of breath—will you give him a lift?’

‘Yes, yes, do stop!’ answered Ippolita compassionately.

The carriage was stopped. ‘Come along, Aligi, the gentlefolks will do you a good turn—jump up!’

The good Christian approached panting and bent double over the crooked handle of his stick, covered with dust, dripping with perspiration, dazed and stupefied by the sun. A fringe of red beard encircled his freckled face from ear to ear; reddish wisps hung from under his hat and were plastered to his damp forehead; his deep-sunk eyes, converging towards the bridge of his nose, were colourless, and looked like those of an epileptic.

‘*Grazie*,’ he said, ‘may Heaven reward you! May the Madonna go with you! But I must not get up.’

In his left hand he carried some object wrapped in a white handkerchief.

‘Is that your *voto* you are carrying?’ asked Cola; ‘let me see.’

The man unfolded the corner of a handkerchief and disclosed a waxen leg, pallid as the limb of a corpse, on which a great purple sore was painted. The heat had melted it and made it shiny, as if damp with perspiration.

‘Do you not see that it is melting?’ and Cola put out his hand to feel it; ‘why, it is quite soft. If you go on foot it will fall to pieces in your hand.’

‘I must not get up—it is a vow,’ repeated Aligi; and he anxiously examined the hook by which it was to hang, raising it to the level of his slanting eyes.

On all that burning, dusty road, under the fierce hard light of the sun, there was no sadder sight than this exhausted man and that pallid object, revolting as an amputated limb, which was to perpetuate the memory of a sore and hang upon a wall

already covered by similar effigies of all the infirmities that human flesh is heir to through the ages.

'Avanti!' and the horses resumed their gallop.

Leaving the low hills behind them, the road now crossed a plain, opulent with cornfields that were nearly ready for cutting. Cola, with senile loquacity, related the circumstance of Aligi's illness and of the gangrenous sore healed by a touch of the Virgin's finger. Here and there along the road the hedges were overtopped by the tall ears of corn like a fair cup filled to o'erflowing.

'There is the shrine!' exclaimed Ippolita, pointing to a red brick building rising up in the centre of a wide meadow. A moment or two later the carriage had joined the crowd.

VI

It was a wonderful and terrible spectacle, unmatched by any other combination of men or things ever seen or heard of before, composing a medley so strange, so wild, so dissimilar, that it outdid the maddest visions of a nightmare. Every conceivable ugliness, every shameless vice, all the spasms and deformities that flesh is capable of; tears of repentance, and drunken laughter; folly, cupidity, knavery, lasciviousness, idiocy, mortal fatigue, stony indifference, speechless despair; the hymns of the pious, the gibbering of demoniacs, the parades of mountebanks, the clashing of bells, the blaring of trumpets; the braying of asses, the lowing of cattle, the neighing of horses; the crackling of fire under pots. Mountains of fruit and confectionery, a vast display of household utensils, of stuffs, arms, jewellery, and rosaries; the obscene dances of the acrobats, the convulsions of epileptics, blows exchanged in fighting bouts, the sudden flight and pursuit of thieves through the turmoil; the offscourings of the foulest corruption vomited by the gutters of distant cities and poured out now upon an ignorant and bewildered multitude, a cloud of parasites like gadflies on the cattle, settling down upon this compact and defenceless crowd; every base

temptation to brutal appetite, every lewd debauchery practised in broad daylight—and this pandemonium boiled and surged and fermented round the house of the Virgin.

The house was massive but the architecture vulgar, without decorations of any kind—not even whitewash—and built of rough red brick. Against the outside walls and the pillars, vendors of pious objects had set up their tents and stalls and carried on their trade. Close by were the booths of the travelling showmen, decorated with large pictures representing bloody battles and the feasts of cannibals. At the entrance to them stood cross-eyed men of more than dubious aspect, shouting and blowing trumpets, while brazen women with enormously fat legs and flaccid bosoms scarcely covered by their dirty tights and spangled rags, strutted up and down lauding in extravagant jargon the wonders concealed behind the red curtains at their back. One of these dilapidated huzzies, who looked as if she might be the offspring of a dwarf and a cretin, was engaged in fondling and kissing a lewd monkey, while beside her a clown, his face plastered with flour and red paint, was frenziedly ringing a deafening bell.

The processions arrived in long lines preceded by their cross-bearers chanting the hymn. The women held on to one another by the skirt, and walked as if hypnotised, their eyes dilated and fixed. Those from the Trigno wore skirts of scarlet cloth pleated in a thousand folds, fastened half-way up their backs, almost under the armpits, and bound about with a many-coloured sash tied in a great knot behind. They trailed along, dropping with fatigue, their feet wide apart, dragging their heavy shoes, with the appearance of some strange humpbacked animals. Several of them had goitres hanging over their glittering gold necklaces.

Viva Maria!

Above the heads of the crowd on a little raised platform sat the somnambulists, opposite to one another. The bandage over their eyes left nothing of the face visible but their indefatigably

loquacious mouths overflowing with saliva. They spoke in a sing-song voice with a nod of the head to mark the time. At intervals they would draw the superabundant saliva back into their mouths with a faint hissing sound. One of them, holding up a greasy playing-card, cried, 'This is the true Anchor of Hope!' Another one, in whose enormous mouth a thickly coated yellow tongue appeared and disappeared between the decayed teeth, sat leaning forward, her large coarse hands spread upon her knees, and a heap of copper coins in her lap. The audience stood round in a circle listening intently, drinking in every word, never winking an eyelid or making a single movement, only from time to time moistening their dry lips with their tongues.

Viva Maria!

New bands of pilgrims arrived, passed by and disappeared. Here and there, in the shadow of the booths, under large blue umbrellas, or even in the full blaze of the sun, old women, broken with fatigue, lay prone upon the arid grass asleep with their faces between their hands. Others, seated on the ground with their legs crossed under them, were laboriously chewing bread in silence, taking no notice of anything, unaffected by the surrounding excitement.

Some of them were covered with sores and scars, toothless, bald—these were neither sleeping nor eating, but sat there motionless and resigned as if they were waiting for death, and over their poor old carcasses, like carrion in a ditch, there hovered and buzzed a dense cloud of flies.

But at the eating-stalls under tents heated well-nigh to burning point by the blaze of the midday sun, or round posts fixed in the ground and decorated with boughs, the voracity of those had full play who had laboriously scraped together their small savings against this day to accomplish a vow, and at the same time satisfy the boundless cravings of appetite, sharpened by a long course of meagre fare and arduous labour. In the faces bent low over the platters, by the grinding motion of their jaws, the rending and tearing of their hands—in all their attitudes you recognised the famished animal in the act

of consuming unwonted food. From circular holes transformed into fireplaces, steaming caldrons full of great violet lumps of meat sent forth an appetising odour. A young girl, yellow and slender as a grasshopper, offered strings of cheeses, shaped like horses, birds, and flowers. A man with a face as smooth and unctuous as a woman's, gold earrings in his ears, and his arms and hands stained with aniline like a dyer's, was selling cooling drinks that looked like poisons.

Viva Maria!

Fresh bands arrived and passed along. The crowd surged round the portico, unable to enter the church, which was already packed. Jugglers, sharpers, swindlers, charlatans, blacklegs of every sort and description, called and beckoned and tempted them. The whole fraternity of rapine, scenting the prey from afar, swooped down upon them with a lightning stroke that never by any chance missed its mark. They lured the simpleton on by a thousand artifices, raising his hopes of prompt and assured gain, and encouraging him by all manner of wiles to risk his money. Then, having roused his cupidity to fever pitch and deprived him of all prudence and reason, they stripped him mercilessly of his last penny by the most transparent frauds, and ran off laughing in his face, leaving him dumbfounded. Not that his example served to deter others from falling into the same trap. Each one deeming himself more astute and less gullible than his neighbour, hastened to avenge him, and went headlong to destruction. The incalculable and ceaseless privations endured without a murmur for a whole year to scrape together a little money—those deprivations which make the peasant's avarice as sordid and debasing as that of beggars—all was revealed in the trembling of the knotted, bony hand that drew the money from the depths of a pocket to cast it to the four winds of heaven.

Viva Maria!

New processions arrived and passed on. One undeviating and ever-renewed torrent flowed through the midst of the confused and shifting crowd, one unchanging sound dominated the medley of clamour. By degrees, against the

turgid background of discordant sounds, the ear was conscious of nothing but the clear name of Mary. The hymn triumphed over the uproar, the uninterrupted sparkling wave of sound surged round and beat against the sun-baked walls of the sanctuary.

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

For some minutes Giorgio and Ippolita, their heads swimming with confusion and fatigue, watched the motley and formidable throng, which exhaled a fœtid odour of corruption, and out of which emerged the painted faces of the mountebanks and the bandaged foreheads of the sibyls. Nausea gripped them by the throat and urged them to flee, and yet the attraction of this strange human spectacle was still stronger, and constrained them to remain in the thick of the crowd, or carried them to the spots where the profoundest misery, the worst excesses of cruelty, of ignorance and pain, were displayed, where yells and curses resounded and tears flowed.

‘Let us get near the church,’ said Ippolita, who seemed half beside herself, caught by the wave of dementia spread abroad by the fanatic bands, who pressed onwards with increasing fury as the sun blazed down more pitilessly upon their heads.

‘But have you the strength to go on?’ asked Giorgio, taking her hands in his. ‘We will get away from here if you like and find some place to rest. I am so afraid you will be ill. Shall we go?’

‘No, no—I feel quite well, I can stand it. Let us get near the church and go inside. Everybody is going there. Oh, listen how they are shrieking!’

Her distress was plainly visible. Her face looked drawn and pinched, and the hand with which she held Giorgio’s arm fidgeted incessantly with his coat-sleeve. But she never took her eyes off the door of the sanctuary, through which you could see the faint blue mist of the incense and the flickering tongues of the lighted tapers.

'Listen to those cries!' She swayed giddily. The cries might have proceeded from a massacre; it was as if the men and women were throttling one another, were stifling in a sea of blood.

'They are imploring the blessing,' Cola explained. The old man had not left his guests for one moment, and had given himself a world of trouble to open a passage for them through the crowd, and keep a little clear space about them.

'Do you really wish to go in?' he asked.

'Yes, yes,' answered Ippolita resolutely, 'let us.'

The old peasant preceded them in the direction of the porch, making vigorous play with his elbows. Ippolita scarcely touched the ground, half carried along by Giorgio, who had need of all his strength to sustain her as well as himself. A beggar woman followed close upon their heels imploring their charity in a whining voice, stretching out her hands, almost touching them, till they seemed to see nothing but that aged yellow hand, deformed by great knots at the joints, with long purple nails, and excoriated skin between the fingers—it was like the hand of a sick and decrepit monkey.

They reached the porch at last and leaned against one of the pillars, close to a rosary-stall.

The procession circled round the church, awaiting their turn to enter—round and round, without intermission, bare-headed, following the cross-bearer, with never a break in their chant. Men and women alike were furnished with a stout stick, surmounted by a cross or a bunch of flowers, on which they leaned with all their tired weight. Their foreheads dripped, rivulets of perspiration ran down their cheeks and soaked their clothing. The men's shirts were unbuttoned, their throats and arms bare, the backs of their arms, their hands, their wrists, their chests, covered with indigo-blue tattooing, proofs of former pilgrimages, of blessings accorded or vows accomplished. Every conceivable deformity of

muscle or bone, every diversity of human ugliness, all the indelible marks of labour, of intemperance, of disease; skulls pointed or debased, bald or woolly-haired, covered with scars or excrescences; eyes white and opaque like balls of curd, or mournful and glassy like those of great solitary toads; noses flattened to the face as if by a blow from a fist, or hooked like vultures' beaks, or long and fleshy like a proboscis, or eaten away by ulceration; cheeks veined with red like vine-leaves in the autumn, or yellow and wrinkled as tripe, or rough and bristling like the bearded wheat; mouths thin as a slash from a razor or burst and flabby as an over-ripe fig, drawn and crumpled round their toothless vacuity or armed with fangs like the tusks of a boar; hare-lips, goitres, erysipelas, scrofula, ulcers;—every horror that flesh is capable of, passed in review under the glare of the sun before the house of the Virgin.

Viva Maria!

Each party had a cross-bearer and a conductor. The latter was always a muscular and vehement man, stimulating the faithful with the yells and gestures of a demoniac, driving the laggards forward with blows on the back, dragging up old men who were dropping with fatigue, scolding the women if they stopped singing for one moment to take breath. An olive-skinned giant with flaming eyes under a shock of black hair dragged three women after him by three ropes attached to as many halters. A woman came along walking in a sack, her only covering, with apertures for her head and arms. Another one, tall and emaciated, with a livid face and colourless eyes, marched along like a somnambulist, without singing, never turning to right or left, and displaying on her breast a crimson band like the blood-stained dressing of a mortal wound; stumbling at every step, as if she no longer had the strength to keep upon her feet, but must inevitably fall never to rise again. Another woman, savage as a beast of prey, a rustic Fury, with a blood-red cloak twisted about her wide hips, the bosom of her dress glittering with embroidery like the scales of a fish, brandished a black crucifix to guide and

excite the efforts of her handful of followers. Another one carried on her head a cradle covered with a black cloth, like Liberata on that tragic night.

Viva Maria!

Round and round the church they marched, quickening their pace, raising their voices, rising to an ever higher pitch of excitement by yelling and gesticulating like creatures possessed. In a sort of deep coffin carried by four men lay a paralytic suffocated by excess of fat, his hands swollen and distorted by gout till they looked like some kind of monstrous earth-root. His limbs shook in a perpetual tremor, perspiration poured from his forehead and his bald head and ran down his broad pink face. A number of scapularies hung round his neck, and the leaflet relating to the Image was spread out over his body. He gasped and groaned as if in his last agony, diffusing an insufferable smell of decay as if he exhaled through every pore the pitiless torments which were causing this last flutter of life in him; and yet he had no desire to die, and had himself carried thus in his coffin to the feet of the Madonna that she might prolong his life. Not far from him some strong men, accustomed to carry heavy statues on the top of high standards at religious festivals, were dragging a maniac by the arm, who struggled bellowing in their grasp, his clothes torn to shreds, foaming at the mouth, his eyes starting from his head, his hair on end, the arteries of his neck swollen, and his face purple like a man who has been hanged. Aligi too passed by, the man who had been cured by a miracle, as deathly pale now as his waxen limb. And all the others passed again in their endless revolution—the three women with the halters, the Fury with the black crucifix, the cataleptic woman with the blood-red band, and the one with the cradle on her head; also the woman in the sack, clothed in her mortification, bathed in silent tears that flowed from under her drooping lids, a figure out of the remote past, alone in the midst of the crowd, surrounded by a halo of ancient penitential rigour, reminding Giorgio of that magnificent Clementine basilica, the rude and primitive crypt of which kept alive the

memory of the Christians of the ninth century and the times of Ludovico II.

Viva Maria!

The circling march went on without a pause, the pace growing quicker and the voices louder as the pilgrims were driven more and more demented by the sun on their heads, the yells of the possessed, and the confused clamour that reached them from the church each time they passed the door; swept along by a savage frenzy which impelled them to the most sanguinary sacrifices, to torture their flesh by the most inhuman devices. They circled and circled, impatient to enter, to prostrate themselves on the sacred stones, to fill with their tears the furrows made in them by thousands upon thousands of knees.

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

A young man in the crowd suddenly fell to the ground in a fit. His neighbours surrounded him and dragged him out of the press. A number of people occupying the side-walk left their places and ran to look.

'What has happened?' asked Ippolita, turning very pale, and exhibiting an extraordinary emotion in her face and voice.

'Oh, nothing—nothing—a sunstroke,' answered Giorgio, taking her arm and trying to draw her away.

But she understood. She saw the men force open the jaws of the epileptic and thrust a key between his teeth to prevent him biting his tongue through. By a mysterious suggestion she had felt the horrid grinding of the teeth, and a shudder ran through her to the very roots of her being, there where the *male sacro* lay dormant, but might be re-awakened.

'It is only some one with the falling sickness,' said Cola di Sciampagna. 'You need not be afraid.'

'Come away from here—come away,' entreated Giorgio, anxious and unnerved, and trying to draw his companion away.

'Suppose she were suddenly to fall like that,' he thought, with an icy chill; 'suppose she were to be taken ill here in the middle of the crowd!'

He remembered the letters dated from Caronno, and the despairing words in which she had made the terrible revelation. And again, as on that day, he had a picture of her, her hands pale and clenched, and between her fingers a torn lock of hair.

'Come away from here! Do you want to go inside the church?'

She did not answer; she seemed stunned as by a blow on the head.

'Shall we go in?' Giorgio repeated, shaking her a little, and doing his best to conceal his distress. He was going to add, 'What are you thinking of?' but he did not dare, seeing in her eyes so mournful a shadow that it wrung his heart and choked his utterance. Then, seized with panic lest this silence and this stupor should be the immediate forerunners of an attack, he faltered out, 'Do you feel ill?'

This anxious inquiry, which betrayed his suspicion and revealed his hidden fear, only served to increase the distress of the lovers.

'No, no,' she returned, with a shiver of horror, clinging close to her companion, as if for protection against the threatening peril.

Hustled by the mob, confused, sick at heart, and wretched as the rest, in need, like them, of pity and succour, weighed down, like them, under the burden of the flesh,—for the moment they were veritably in touch with the multitude in the midst of which they too trembled and suffered, and both for one moment forgot the narrow limits of their own soul in the immensity of human pain.

Ippolita was the first to turn towards the church again, and to the porch through which you caught a vision of blue-white mist and flickering tongues of flame.

'Let us go in,' she gasped, but without loosening her hold on Giorgio.

Cola warned them that it would be impossible to get in by

the main door. 'But I know of another one,' he added ; 'keep close behind me.'

With great difficulty they effected a passage. It seemed as if they were sustained by a fictitious energy, impelled along by a blind obstinacy, resembling in some sort that displayed by the fanatic pilgrims in their ceaseless revolution round the church. They had caught the contagion. Giorgio, too, felt that he was no longer master of himself ; his nerves dominated him, and imposed upon him the disorder and excess of their sensations.

'Follow me,' repeated the old man, cutting through the stream by main force, and doing his best to protect his charges against the press.

They entered by a side door into a kind of sacristy, where, through the all-pervading mist, they remarked that the walls were entirely covered with *ex voto* offerings in wax, hung there in witness of miracles performed by the Virgin. Legs, arms, hands, feet, breasts, shapeless lumps representing tumours, cancers, and ulcers ; rude modellings of monstrous diseases, painted crimson and purple sores screaming on the ghastly pallor of the wax ; effigies hanging motionless there on the four walls, that filled one with shuddering horror, reminding one of the charnel-house of an hospital, where all the amputated limbs were collected together. Confused heaps of human beings encumbered the floor, out of which appeared livid faces, blood-stained, foaming mouths, foreheads covered with dust, bald heads, white hair. They were mostly old men who had fallen in a fit before the altar, and been carried in here and piled up on the top of one another like corpses in a plague-pit. One old man was at that moment being carried in by two others who were sobbing, while their movements made his head swing to and fro, first on his breast and then on his shoulder, and drops of blood trickled down on to his shirt from deep scratches on his lips and chin. Behind him the despairing cries rang on, cries which he probably no longer heard, demoniac yells, imploring the blessing he had failed to obtain.

Madonna ! Madonna ! Madonna !

The clamour was absolutely indescribable—more agonising than the screams of men being roasted alive in a burning house without hope of rescue, more heart-rending than the cries of drowning mariners condemned to certain death in a midnight sea.

Madonna ! Madonna ! Madonna !

A thousand hands were stretched towards the altar in savage frenzy. Women dragged themselves along on their knees, sobbing, tearing their hair, beating their foreheads on the stone floor, writhing in convulsions. Several of them slowly approached the altar on all-fours, supporting the whole weight of their bodies on their elbows and the balls of their bare feet. They crawled like reptiles, arching their bodies and progressing in a series of slight propulsions, their horny yellow heels and projecting ankle-bones appearing from under their petticoats. From time to time, the hands seconded the efforts of the elbows or trembled round the mouths that kissed the dust, or near the tongue which traced in the dust the sign of the cross, with saliva mixed with blood. The crawling bodies passed over these signs without effacing them, while in front of each head a man struck the ground with a stick to mark the direct path to the altar.

Madonna ! Madonna ! Madonna !

Madonna !

Relations and friends dragged themselves on their knees along each side of the line to watch the votive torture. Now and then they would bend down and encourage the unfortunate creatures, and when they seemed on the point of losing consciousness would go to their assistance, supporting them under the arms or fanning them with handkerchiefs, weeping bitterly as they did so. Their tears flowed even more violently while helping old men or youths in the performance of this same vow ; for not only women but men—old, young, and middle-aged—subjected themselves to this anguish in order to render themselves worthy to approach the altar and lift their eyes to the Divine Image. Each one

laid his tongue on the moist place left before him, each one struck forehead or chin on the same spot where another had left a torn shred of skin, a drop of blood, of sweat, of his tears. Suddenly a ray of sunshine entering through the great portal, and piercing the interstices of the crowd, lit up those contracted feet made horny by much contact with the arid ground or rocky mountain-paths, so distorted that they looked less like feet than hoofs; it illumined the hairy and the bald heads, brown, black or white, some supported on bull necks swelling with the effort, others trembling and feeble as the livid head of an old tortoise projecting from its shell, or like some skull but newly unearthed, and bearing on it still a wisp or two of grey hair, a scrap of leathery skin.

At intervals a wave of incense would slowly roll over this train of reptiles, blotting out compassionately, for a moment, all these humiliations, these hopes, this bodily anguish.

Madonna! Madonna! Madonna! Fresh arrivals, new patients presented themselves at the altar soliciting a miracle, covering with their shadows and their clamour the recumbent bodies that seemed as though they could never stand upright again. Mothers uncovered their dried breasts and implored the Virgin to bestow upon them the blessing of milk, while behind them came their relatives carrying puling, wailing infants. Wives prayed that their barrenness might be removed, offering up their nuptial jewels and garments.

‘Grant me this boon, Holy Mother, for the sake of the Son in Thine arms.’

At first they would pray in a low voice, relating their woes with tears, as if in secret colloquy with the Image—as if the Image were bending from on high to listen specially to their lamentation. But by degrees their excitement rose to fury, to madness, as if by force of clamour and wild gestures they would tear from it the fulfilment of their desires, gathering up all their strength for one last piercing shriek which should penetrate to the very heart of the Virgin.

‘Grant me this boon! Grant me this boon!’

Then they stopped, gazing anxiously with fixed and dilated

eyes, in the hope of intercepting at last some sign on the countenance of the heavenly personage, glittering in a dazzle of gems between the pillars of the inaccessible altar.

A new stream of fanatics flowed in, spreading themselves in their turn along the whole length of the grating, clamorous cries and violent gestures alternating with the offerings. Inside the grating which barred the access to the high altar stood priests receiving the offerings of jewels or money into their fat white hands, looking, as they turned from side to side to hold out the right hand or the left, like beasts behind the cages of a menagerie. Behind them, again, were clerks holding large brass salvers, on which the offerings were heaped up. Near the door of the sacristy other priests were bending over a table counting the money, examining and appraising the jewels; while one of them, bony and red-haired, entered the items with a quill pen in a great register. They would leave this occupation in turn and go and officiate. From time to time a bell rang, and the censers swung smoking through the air; long blue streaks floated over the tonsured heads and dispersed in the chancel; the pious fragrance mingled with the sickening odour of humanity.

*Ora pro nobis, Sancta Dei Genitrix,
Ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi.*

At times, in one of those awful and unexpected pauses which occur in hurricanes, when the crowd was struck dumb in an agony of suspense, the Latin words were distinctly audible—

Concede nos famulos tuos . . .

Through the great portal, with much pomp and circumstance, there came a married couple, escorted by their whole kindred, in a corruscation of gold and a rustling of silk. The wife was young and imposing, with the head of a barbaric queen, thick eyebrows that met, glossy, waving black hair, and full red lips, the upper one with a masculine shadow on it, and slightly uplifted over the irregular incisor teeth. A necklace of great gold beads wound three times round her neck; hoops

of gold, studded with filigree flowers, hung from her ears against her rich cheek ; a bodice, glittering like a coat of mail, confined her full bosom. She advanced with grave dignity, wholly absorbed in her own thoughts, hardly moving an eyelid, one hand, loaded with rings, laid upon her husband's shoulder. He, too, was young, of moderate height, well-nigh beardless, and very pale, with an air of profound melancholy, as if devoured by some secret malady.

A whisper ran along their path, but they neither spoke nor turned their heads. Both seemed to bear in their aspect the fatality of a primitive mystery. They advanced, followed by their relations, male and female, in a chain, with their arms interlaced as in some antique dance. What vow were they carrying out? What boon had they come to solicit? The story flew from mouth to mouth : they had come to implore the return of virile power to the young man, destroyed in him doubtless by some spell. The virginity of his bride was still intact, the nuptial couch still undisturbed.

When they reached the chancel grating, they both in silence raised their eyes to the Image, and stood thus, motionless, for a few minutes, absorbed in the same voiceless supplication. But behind them the two mothers stretched out their arms and wrung their rough and sunburned hands that had strewn the auspicious corn in vain upon the wedding-day, while they cried aloud, 'Madonna ! Madonna ! Madonna !'

Slowly the bride drew the rings from her fingers and laid them in the priest's hand, then she divested herself of her heavy earrings, and finally of the family necklace, offering up all this wealth upon the altar.

'Take it, Blessed Virgin ! Take it, most Holy Mother of Miracles !' cried the mothers, their voices hoarse with vociferating, redoubling their demonstrations of fervour, and each keeping an eye upon the other to see that she was not outdone by her neighbour under the intent and watchful gaze of the assembled crowd.

They watched the jewels and gold falling—falling—into the

hands of the impassive priest; they heard it clink upon the clerk's salver, the precious metal, the fruit of the strenuous labour of many generations, hoarded up for years and years in the depths of some coffer, and only brought to light on each new wedding-day. They saw the family wealth fall and vanish out of sight for ever. The severity of the sacrifice drove them to desperation, the violence of their agitation communicating itself to their neighbours, till the whole clan ended by lifting up their voices with one accord and crying aloud. The young man alone uttered no sound, keeping his eyes fixed upon the Image, while two streams of tears coursed silently down his cheeks.

A pause ensued, during which the Latin words of the office and the cadence of the hymns sung by the pilgrims circling round the church were audible once more. Then the couple resumed their former attitude, and, with their faces still turned towards the Image, slowly retired. A fresh group interposed between them and the grating, vociferating loudly. For a few moments the young wife was visible by a whole head above the throng, stripped of her nuptial ornaments, but grander and more beautiful than before, as if surrounded by some Dionysian mystery, diffusing over this savage rabble a breath of the antique. She disappeared, never to be forgotten.

Giorgio followed her with his eyes till she was out of sight. Exalted beyond all time and reality, his spirit seemed to be living in an unknown world, in the presence of a nameless people, participating in rites of most obscure origin. The faces of the men and women appeared to him as in some vision of delirium, stamped with a humanity other than his, fashioned of different clay. Their expressions, their gestures, their voices, all their outward signs, confused and stupefied him as if they had no analogy whatsoever with the habitual expressions of humanity such as he had known hitherto. Certain figures developed a sudden magnetic attraction for him. He went after them in the throng, dragging Ippolita with him, or stood on tiptoe following them with his eyes,

watching their every action, feeling their cries echo in his heart; and, gradually becoming infected by their delirium, he was conscious of a brutal desire to howl and writhe with them.

From time to time Ippolita and he would look each other in the face, and observed that each was pale and convulsed, dazed and sinking with fatigue. Yet neither would be the first to propose to leave the horrible place, though both had almost reached the limits of endurance. Hustled by the crowd, swept off their feet at times, they were carried hither and thither in the stream, clasping one another by the hand or arms, while the old man was unremitting in his efforts to assist and protect them. A company surging up to the altar crushed them against the barrier. For several minutes they were forced to stay there, pressed on all sides, enveloped in a cloud of incense, deafened by the cries, suffocated by the heat, in the very heart of the turmoil and delirium.

Madonna! Madonna! Madonna!

It was the crawling women who, arrived at their goal, now stood upright. One of them, rigid as a corpse, had to be lifted up in a block by her friends. They stood her on her feet and shook her. She seemed to be dead. Her whole face was covered with dust, the skin torn from her forehead and chin, her mouth full of blood. They breathed on her face to bring her back to consciousness, wiped out her mouth with a linen cloth that soon was soaked with crimson, shook her once more, and called her loudly by name, close in her ear. Suddenly, without warning, she threw back her head, and, hurling herself against the grating, seized the iron bars convulsively and began to shriek like a woman in travail. There she screamed and fought, drowning every other noise, while a flood of tears poured down her face, washing away the dust and blood.

Madonna! Madonna! Madonna!

And behind her and beside her other women struggled and swayed and fainted and supplicated.

La grazia! La grazia!

Their voices failed them, they turned ghastly pale and fell heavily to the ground, to be carried away like inanimate blocks, while others seemed to spring out of the earth to take their places.

La grazia ! La grazia !

With these cries, which wrung the breasts of those who uttered them—these words, repeated without cessation, with the persistence of unconquerable faith—the dense smoke of the incense lowering heavy as a thunder-cloud, the physical contact of their bodies, the mingled breath, the blood, the tears,—the multitude was for one moment possessed by one spirit, became as one body, one being, wretched and terrible, with but one voice, one gesture, one frenzied thought. All the various ills melted into one which the Virgin must remove, all the different desires into a single one which the Virgin must fulfil.

La grazia ! La grazia !

And under the glittering Image the tapers wavered in the blast of passion.

VII

LATER ON, Giorgio and Ippolita were seated in the open air, somewhat apart from the crowd, under the trees, dazed and shattered, like two people just saved from a shipwreck, speechless, almost deprived of the power of thought, though still shaken from time to time with a shudder of horror. Ippolita's eyes were red with weeping. In the sanctuary, in that moment of supreme tragedy, they had both been seized with the general prevailing frenzy, and, fearful of losing their senses, they had hastily made their escape.

They were sitting now under the trees at the extreme limit of the common. This part was almost deserted save for a few groups of horses with empty pack-saddles, motionless as the gnarled trunks of the olives round which they were tethered, and to whose shadow they lent an additional sadness. One could hear the distant roar of the swarming crowd, the chants,

the blare of trumpets, the jingle of bells ; one could see the long lines of pilgrims trailing round the church, entering it and passing out again.

'Would you try to go to sleep a little ?' asked Giorgio, as Ippolita closed her eyes.

'No ; but I cannot keep my eyes open any longer.'

Giorgio felt the same. The continuance and acuteness of his sensations had overstepped the limits of his powers of resistance. The spectacle had become intolerable. He rose to his feet.

'Come,' he said, 'get up, and we will go and sit further off.'

They descended into a little cultivated valley, seeking the shade. The sun was scorching, and they both thought regretfully of their house at San Vito with its beautiful airy rooms overlooking the sea.

'Do you feel very bad ?' asked Giorgio, observing signs of evident suffering on her face, and in her eyes that sombre look which had terrified him just now in the midst of the crowd under the portico.

'No ; but I am very tired.'

'Could you sleep ? Why not try to get a little sleep ? Lean against me, will you ? You will feel the better for it afterwards.'

'No—no.'

'Yes, lean against me ; we will wait here for Cola to take us back to Casalbordino. In the meantime you can rest.'

She took off her hat and rested her head against his shoulder.

'How beautiful you are !' he said, looking down at her.

She smiled, transfigured and rendered more profoundly seductive by suffering.

'What an age it is since you gave me a kiss !' he murmured.

They kissed each other.

'Now sleep a little,' he said, with tender solicitude.

The sentiment of his love seemed to him refreshed and rejuvenated after all the strange and hideous experiences he

had just gone through. His power of self-isolation, of rejecting all communion but with the chosen one of his heart, returned to him. With inconceivable rapidity his spirit freed itself of the phantoms it had created during the reign of the mystic illusion and the ascetic ideal; he threw off the yoke of that 'divine' will which he had endeavoured to substitute for his own languid one, despairing of arousing it. He now felt the same antipathy to 'the faith' as he had done in the church towards the loathsome creatures crawling in the sacred dust. He recalled the fat white hands of the priests receiving the offerings, and the ceaseless swaying from side to side of the black figures behind the grating of the chancel. It was all so ignoble; it contradicted so completely the presence of that Divine Lord of whom he had hoped to receive some revelation—suddenly, as in a clap of thunder. And now the grand experiment had been tried, he had come in contact with the inferior strata of his race, and the result had been nothing but unmitigated horror. It could not be that his being had its roots in that soil; he could have nothing in common with this multitude which, like the majority of animal species, had already attained to its definite and fixed type. Through how many centuries, by how many generations, had that immutable type been perpetuated? Therefore, the human species had an absolutely immovable basis unaffected by the undulatory motion of the upper zones. Therefore the ideal type of humanity was not to be looked for in the distant future, at the end of an unknown term of progressive evolutions; it could only manifest itself on the crest of the waters—among the most superior beings. His experiment had failed utterly. He was as much a stranger to these people as if they were a tribe of South Sea islanders, as much an alien to his country and his native soil as he was to his family and his childhood's home. He must renounce for ever the vain search for a fixed point, a stable and assured support. 'I feel like a man condemned to stand upon a perpetually oscillating surface, and who feels the ground give way beneath his feet wherever he may place them.' He had made use of that simile before

to illustrate his ceaseless, fluctuating anxiety. But since he so greatly desired to preserve his life, would he not, by force of practice, become sufficiently expert to maintain his balance amid the varying impulses, and tread freely and fearlessly on the edge of the precipice? It was very certain that he wished to preserve his life—his successive experiences proved that incontrovertibly. A profound instinct which had remained unimpaired hitherto was for ever rising up armed with fresh desires to fight against his mortal lethargy. That dream of asceticism which he had constructed with so much splendour, and adorned with so much elegance, what was it but another expedient for warding off death? Had he not from the first proposed to himself the alternatives—either to follow Demetrio's example or to devote himself to Heaven? He had chosen the latter in order to save his life. 'You must train your mind to avoid truth and certitude if you would live—renounce all keen experience, rend no veils, believe all you see, accept all you hear. Look not beyond the world of appearances created by your own vivid imagination. Adore the illusion.'

The confused roar of the barbarous multitude which he had just quitted came to him from afar, suggesting to his heated imagination a sinister and mighty furnace, wherein demoniacs were rending each other limb from limb. And above the ceaseless roar, with every flutter of the breeze, he caught the soft rustle of the leafy boughs which protected his meditations and Ippolita's repose. Ippolita lay exhausted with half-closed lips, scarcely breathing, her forehead damp with a light moisture. Her hands—gloveless and very white—were clasped in her lap, and Giorgio almost fancied he saw between her fingers a torn lock of hair. And there appeared and disappeared before him in the hard sunlight a vision of the epileptic—the young man who had fallen suddenly in the portico; he saw him writhe in the grasp of the two men who tried to force the key between his teeth. The phantom came and went as if it were a dream of Ippolita's materialised and rendered visible. 'What if she were to awake and her malady

wake with her !' he thought with an inward shudder. 'Maybe the image is transmitted to me from her—it is perhaps her dream that I see. And her dream may be caused by some organic disturbance which is beginning now, but may increase to an attack. Is not a dream sometimes the forerunner of an approaching illness ?'

He examined her attentively, as he had done on the first day of her arrival, so long ago it seemed. The light shadows of the leaves trembled across her face. He heard the ceaseless clamour rise up from the sanctuary into the clear air. Melancholy fell upon his heart once more, a hopeless languor took possession of him, he leaned his head against the tree trunk and closed his eyes, incapable of thought.

He had almost fallen asleep when a sudden start from Ippolita shook him.

'Giorgio !' She looked dazed and frightened, not recognising where she was ; the bright light hurt her, and she moaned and covered her eyes with her hands.

'Dio mio, what pain !' She complained of a sharp pain in her head.

'Where are we ? Ah, what a horrid dream it all was !'

'I ought not to have brought you,' said Giorgio anxiously ; 'how I regret it !'

'I have not the strength to get up ; help me.'

He took her under the arms and lifted her to her feet. She swayed giddily, and clung to him for support.

'What is the matter?—what do you feel ?' he cried in a trembling voice, seized with a sudden panic lest she should be attacked then and there in the open country far from all assistance. He clasped her in his arms and held her close against his wildly beating heart.

'No, no, it is nothing,' faltered Ippolita, suddenly understanding the cause of his terror, and turning very pale. 'My head swims a little, the heat has made me giddy, that is all ; it will pass.'

Her lips were almost white, and she avoided her lover's eyes. He could not yet quite overcome his terror, but was deeply

distressed that he should have re-awakened her anxious pre-occupation and her feeling of shame on the subject of her malady. A sentence from one of her letters returned to his memory. 'What if it should overtake me in your arms? No, no—I never will, I never can see you again!'

'It has passed; I feel better now,' she said faintly. 'But I am very thirsty; where can we get something to drink?'

'Down there, near the church, where the tents are,' answered Giorgio.

She shook her head violently.

'I will go; you wait for me here.'

But she remained obstinate in her refusal.

'We will send Cola; he must be somewhere near. I will go and call him.'

'Yes, call him, but to take us back to Casalbordino. I would rather wait and get it there. Come.'

She took his arm, and they mounted the little slope; arrived at the top, they could look down on the swarming plain, the white booths, and the red brick edifice of the church. Round the olive-trees, the melancholy forms of the beasts of burden stood as motionless as before. Near by, under the shadow of the same tree where they had first sought refuge, sat an aged woman, who looked as if she might well be a hundred years old. She too was absolutely motionless, her hands spread upon her knees, her thin legs showing from under her petticoats. Strands of white hair fell down her waxen cheeks, her lipless mouth was like a deep wrinkle in her face, her eyes sealed up for ever under bleeding eyelids; the memory of a thousand griefs and pains seemed to hover about her.

'Is she dead?' whispered Ippolita, stopping short, and overcome by fear and reverence.

The crowd surged round the sanctuary, the processions chanted on under the cruel sun. One of these processions was just streaming out of the portico, directing its course towards the open space before the church, preceded by the cross-bearer. Arrived there, they all stopped and turned their faces towards the sanctuary, grouped in a semicircle; the

women crouching on the ground; the men standing, the cross-bearer in the centre. They prayed and crossed themselves, and then simultaneously sent forth a great cry towards the church, a last salutation. They then resumed their march, chanting as they went—

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

The old woman never changed her position. Something grand and terrible and indefinitely supernatural emanated from that aged figure in its solitude under the shadow of the olive, itself all withered, almost petrified, with its trunk split as if by fire from Heaven. If she had any life in her, she certainly neither saw with her eyes nor heard with her ears; all her senses were extinct. Yet, nevertheless, she had the aspect of a witness looking towards the invisible region of eternity.

‘Death itself is not so mysterious as the remains of life left in this human ruin,’ mused Giorgio, and there rose up before his spirit the vague image of some most ancient myth. ‘Why awakenest thou not the Ancient Mother who sleeps on the threshold of Death? In her slumber lies the First Knowledge. Why inquirest thou not of the Wise Mother of the Earth——?’ Vague words, fragments of obscure ancient epopees, floated through his memory.

‘Let us go on, Giorgio,’ said Ippolita, giving his arm a little shake after an interval of meditative silence. ‘How dreadfully sad everything is here!’ Her voice was faint, and in her eyes that sombre shadow, wherein her lover read an inexpressible horror and distress. He dared not comfort her, lest she should take his words of encouragement as an indication that his mind was still occupied with the danger that hung over her ever since she saw the epileptic fall in the crowd. But after a few steps she stopped again, suffocated by the irrepressible sobs that would rise in her throat. She looked first at her lover, and then around her despairingly.

‘Dio! Dio! what misery!’

Her distress was wholly physical, a brutal and overwhelming wretchedness which rose out of the depths of her being like

something material and heavy, crushing her under its intolerable weight. She wished she could throw herself upon the ground, never to rise again, to lose consciousness and breathe out her life.

'Tell me, dearest, tell me what you would like me to do—what can I do to help you?' faltered Giorgio, clasping her hand, and agitated by a nameless fear.

Was not this depression the forerunner of one of her attacks?

For some moments she stood with fixed and staring eyes, but was startled violently out of her numbness by a shout from the procession close by, sending their parting salutation to the sanctuary.

'Take me away somewhere; perhaps there is a hotel at Casalbordino. Oh, where can Cola be!'

Giorgio strained his eyes in the hope of discovering the old man. 'Perhaps he is looking for us in the crowd,' he said, 'or he may have gone to Casalbordino, thinking to find us there.'

'Then let us go without him. Look, there are some carriages over there.'

'Very well, if you like; but lean on me.'

They turned off to the highroad, lying white across the plain. The uproar seemed to follow them. The trumpet of the mountebanks sent its strident blare after them, the never-changing cadence of the hymns dominated all the other sounds with its exasperating uniformity.

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

A beggar appeared suddenly before them as if he had sprung out of the earth. He held out his hand.

'Charity, for the love of the Madonna!'

He was quite young, and had his head tied up in a red handkerchief, a corner of which covered one of his eyes. He raised the flap and disclosed an eye swollen like a pouch and discharging, the eyelid having a nervous tremor perfectly horrible to witness,

‘Charity, for the love of the Madonna!’

Giorgio hastily gave him something, upon which he covered up the hideous sore. A little further on, they were confronted by a gigantic one-armed man, who drew off part of his shirt in order to exhibit the seamed and raw-looking scar of the amputation.

‘A bite—a bite from a horse. Look at it! Look!’ and he threw himself full length on the ground, kissing the earth, and crying in a rasping voice each time he did so, ‘*Misericordia!*’

Under a tree, another beggar, a cripple, lay propped up on a couch composed of a pack-saddle, a goatskin, and an empty petroleum bottle, and several large stones for a pillow. Wrapped in a filthy coverlet, from under which appeared a pair of hairy legs splashed with dried mud, he furiously shook a distorted, gnarled hand to drive away the flies that attacked him in clouds.

‘Charity! Charity! The blessing of the Virgin upon you Charity!’

Seeing several other beggars hastening towards them, Ippolita quickened her pace, while Giorgio beckoned to the nearest driver. When they were safe inside the carriage, Ippolita gave a sigh of relief. ‘At last!’

‘Is there a hotel at Casalbordino?’ Giorgio inquired of the driver.

‘Yes, signore, there is one.’

‘How long will it take to get there?’

‘About half an hour.’

‘Then take us there.’ He pressed Ippolita’s hand and tried to raise her spirits. ‘Courage, dearest! We will ask for a room and rest a while. We shall look at nothing and hear nothing more. I too am dropping with fatigue, I feel quite light-headed. Are you not hungry?’ he added with a smile.

She smiled in response.

‘It will be like Albano over again—do you remember?’ he went on, calling up the recollection of the old hotel of Ludovico Togni.

She seemed to be calming down by degrees, and he tried to lead her thoughts back to lighter and more cheerful subjects.

'I wonder what has become of Pancrazio! Ah, if we had one of his oranges now! What would I not give for an orange! Are you very thirsty? Do you feel ill?'

'No—I feel better. I cannot believe that all that torture is over. Dio mio! I shall never forget this day—never, never!'

'Poor darling!' He kissed her hands fondly; then, calling her attention to the crops by the wayside: 'Look,' he exclaimed, 'how beautiful the corn is! That will purify our eyes.'

Cornfields stretched away on either side of the road ripe for the sickle, tall and strong, drawing in the sunshine by every delicate point, seeming at moments to flame and turn into fairy gold. Solitary, under the limpid arc of the sky, they breathed a spirit of purity and repose infinitely refreshing to these two weary and saddened hearts.

'What a glare there is!' said Ippolita, drooping her long lashes.

'You have your curtains.'

She smiled; it seemed as though the cloud of depression were on the point of dispersing.

A line of several carriages came along in the opposite direction, going towards the sanctuary, raising a suffocating cloud of dust. During several minutes the road, the bushes, the fields, everything around them was swallowed up in it.

'Charity—for the love of the Virgin! Charity! Charity!'

'Charity, in the name of the Madonna of the Miracles!'

'Give something to a poor soul!'

'Charity! Charity!'

'A piece of bread!'

'Charity!'

One, two, three, four, five voices, and another and another, and voices of people who were not yet visible, burst through

the cloud of dust ; harsh, strident, rumbling, irate, whining—all different, and all discordant.

‘Give us alms!’

‘Charity!’

‘Stop! Stop!’

‘Charity, for the love of the Holy Mother of Miracles!’

‘Charity!’

‘Stop!’

Through the veil of dust there appeared a scrambling pack of monsters. One of them waved the stumps of his amputated hands, which looked raw and gory, as if the mutilation were quite recent ; another had leather pads fixed to the palms of his hands, by means of which he painfully dragged along the lifeless mass of his body ; a third had a monstrous goitre, wrinkled and purple, that flapped like a dewlap ; another, by reason of an excrescence on his lip, seemed to be holding a piece of raw liver between his teeth ; another one had his face so eaten away by a cancer that the nasal bone and upper jaw were laid bare ; others displayed a variety of other horrors with infinite gusto, with violent, not to say menacing gesticulations, as if asserting a right.

‘Stop! Stop!’

‘Give us alms!’

‘Look—look at me!’

‘Charity!’

It was a regular onslaught—well-nigh highway robbery. They were all apparently determined to get something out of the travellers, if they had to twine themselves into the wheels or cling on to the legs of the horses for it.

‘Stop! Stop!’

Giorgio searched wildly in his pockets for money to appease the ravening mob, while Ippolita clung to him in terrified disgust, unable to ward off the fantastic horror that overcame her in this strange, weird country, swarming with sinister life under the great white sun.

‘Stop! Stop!’

‘Charity!’

‘Look at me ! look at me !’

But the driver, growing angry at this point, suddenly rose to his feet, and, brandishing his whip, laid about him vigorously, accompanying each stroke with strong invectives. The whipcord circled and whistled, and the beggars cursed and yelled as the blows fell upon them, but they did not retire ; each one wanted his share of whatever might be forthcoming.

‘Give it to me—to me !’

At last, Giorgio managed to throw a handful of coin into the road, and at once the dust closed over the struggling heap of monsters and choked their blasphemies. The man with the gory stumps and the one with the paralysed legs tried a moment to follow the carriage, but were driven off by the menacing whip.

‘Do not be afraid, signora,’ said the driver ; ‘nobody shall come near you again, I promise you.’

Two fresh voices broke in with yells and groans, invoking the Virgin and Jesus, proclaiming the nature of their deformities and their sores, describing their disease or their shame. Beyond the advance skirmishers who had assailed them, a second army of beggars stretched away in two long lines on each side of the road almost up to the first houses of the distant town.

‘Dio mio ! what a pandemonium !’ murmured Ippolita, faint with horror and exhaustion. ‘Let us get away ; let us turn back, Giorgio ! I implore you, let us turn back !’

Nothing,—neither the vortex of madness which whirled the bands of fanatics round the sanctuary ; nor the despairing wails that seemed as if they must come from a conflagration, a shipwreck, or a massacre ; nor the old men heaped up senseless and bleeding on the floor of the votive chamber ; nor the women crawling towards the altar and tearing their tongues against the stones ; nor that one supreme roar that burst from the multitude as from one man,—nothing of all these could compare in horror with the spectacle of the great dusty, blinding white road on which these human monstrosities, these remnants of a worn-out race, all these creatures sunk to

the level of vermin, displayed their loathsome deformities and gloried in their shame.

The innumerable host occupied the banks and ditches by the roadside, having with them their families, their relations, all their household belongings. There were half-naked women, children olive-coloured as lizards, emaciated, with sullen and rapacious eyes and mouths already old and withered, carrying in their blood the germs of inherited disease. Each party had its show-monster: either crippled, armless, or blind—an idiot, an epileptic, or a leper. Each one had some disease as a patrimony which he cultivated as a source of income. Incited by his family, the monster would detach himself from the group and come forward into the dust, gesticulating and appealing for the benefit of them all.

‘Give—and may Heaven bless you! Look at me! Look at me!’

A one-armed man, flat-nosed and dark-skinned as a mulatto, with a great black mane, swept up the dust in his thick locks, and then shook his head, enveloping himself in a cloud of his own raising. A man suffering from elephantiasis, seated on the ground, pointed to a leg like the trunk of a tree, all covered with brown and yellow blotches, and so enormous, it seemed impossible it should belong to him. A blind man knelt with his palms turned upwards to the sky in the attitude of an ecstatic, and two little gory holes under his great bald forehead. More and more came flocking up out of the distance, as far as the eye could reach under the glare of the sun. Every inch of the great highroad was infested with them. Their supplications ran on without a break, rising and falling, in chorus and separately, in a thousand different accents. The wild and solitary country, the arid, silent sky, the distracting glare on the white, hot road, the immobility of the vegetation, all the surrounding objects made the moment a tragic one, calling up the biblical image of a pathway of desolation leading to an accursed city.

‘Let us get away! Let us turn back—I implore you, Giorgio, turn back!’ Ippolita repeated, shuddering, overcome

by a superstitious idea of a divine punishment, and fearing to encounter other and still more hideous sights under the burning, cloudless sky, in which a metallic rumble was beginning to make itself heard.

‘But where can we go?’

‘Anywhere—anywhere! Over there towards the sea; we can wait there till the train goes—please do!’

Hunger, torturing thirst, and the furnace-like heat of the atmosphere increased their trouble of spirit tenfold.

‘Look! Look there!’ she cried, beside herself with fear, as if at an apparition. Do you see that? Oh, will it never end!’

Through the white and relentless sunshine there advanced towards them a band of men and women clothed in rags, preceded by a sort of crier who shouted and rattled a brass plate. On their shoulders they carried a stretcher covered with a mattress, on which lay a sick woman of corpse-like aspect—a creature yellow and emaciated as a skeleton, swathed in bands of linen like a mummy, and her feet bare. The crier, a lean and olive-skinned man with the eyes of a maniac, pointed to the moribund figure, and related how this woman, who had had an issue of blood for many years, had been miraculously cured by the Virgin at the dawn of that very day. He implored their alms, that, being cured of her complaint, she might have the wherewithal to re-establish her health. He then shook the brass platter on which a few coins jingled.

‘A miracle! a miracle! The Madonna has performed a miracle! Charity, for love of the most holy Virgin!’

Then all the men and women together contracted their faces as if about to burst into tears, the bloodless form raised its skeleton hands with a vague gesture as if to grasp at something in the air, while her bare feet—yellow like her hands and face—had the rigidity of death. And all this spread out in the white, relentless day, coming nearer and nearer.

‘Turn back,’ said Giorgio to the driver; ‘turn back and whip up the horses.’

'But we are just there, signor. What are you afraid of?'

'Turn back, I say!'

His tone was so imperative that the driver had no choice but to turn his horses in the midst of a deafening uproar, and their pace from the top of the hill to the bottom was like a flight after a battle, through thick clouds of dust, penetrated from time to time by a hoarse shout.

'Where to, signor?' asked the driver, bending down through the mist.

'Over there to the sea—hurry!'

Giorgio held the half-fainting Ippolita in his arms without attempting to revive her. He had himself but a confused sense of what was happening. The real and the imaginary mingled and coursed giddily through his brain. A continuous roar filled his ears and prevented him from distinguishing any other sound. His heart was in the grip of an agonising oppression, as in a nightmare—the piercing desire to escape from the region of this horrible dream, to recover his original balance of mind, to see once more the tender smile of the woman he loved so fondly.

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

The sound of the hymn reached them once again—once again the house of the Virgin appeared upon their left surrounded by the swarming crowd, showing red against the conflagration of the sunset, rising haughtily above the tents of the profane, radiating an atmosphere of formidable power.

Viva Maria!

Maria Evviva!

The chant died away, the sanctuary disappeared behind a curve in the road. Suddenly a cool breath swept over the vast and waving cornfields, and a long band of blue shone on the horizon.

'The sea—there is the sea!' exclaimed Giorgio, as if the sight were his salvation. His heart expanded with relief.

'Look up, dear heart—there is the sea!'

BOOK V—TEMPUS DESTRUENDI

THE table on the loggia was gay with bright china, pale blue glass, and deep crimson carnations under the golden light of a large, shaded lamp which seemed a great attraction to the moths fluttering in the summer night.

‘Look, look, Giorgio, a devil moth. It has the eyes of a demon. Look how they glitter!’ And Ippolita pointed to a weird-looking moth, larger than the rest, and covered with a thick tawny fur, its prominent eyes shining like carbuncles in the lamplight.

‘It is coming on to you—take care!’ she laughed gleefully, knowing well Giorgio’s instinctive repugnance at the idea of touching an insect.

‘Oh, I must catch it!’ she cried, with the impulsiveness of a child, and tried to capture the diabolical creature, which would flutter aimlessly round the lamp instead of settling anywhere.

But her efforts—all too hasty and violent—were in vain. She upset a glass, sent a pyramid of fruit rolling over the table, and very nearly broke the lamp shade.

‘Oh, what a fury!’ said Giorgio, egging her on; ‘you will never catch it.’

‘Yes, I shall,’ she retorted, looking him straight in the eyes. ‘Will you bet?’

‘What shall we bet?’

‘Anything you like.’

‘Very well—a surprise.’

‘Good—a surprise.’

Under the warm light her face glowed in its richest,

softest tints, that ideal colouring composed of 'palest amber and dull gold, blended with the hue of faded rose leaves,' wherein, once upon a time, Giorgio Aurispa thought he had discovered the secret of the charm of that fair Venetian who transferred her home to the delicious isle of Cyprus. In her hair she wore a carnation, burning red as a desire, and her eyes, under the shadow of her long lashes, gleamed like deep pools fringed with willows.

At that moment she was the typical woman of desire, the strong yet delicate instrument of sensuous pleasure, the voluptuous and magnificent animal made to adorn a feast, to sweeten the slumbers and excite the equivocal images of æsthetic lust. She appeared thus in all the transcendent supremacy of her animal charm—joyous, animated, lithe, lascivious, cruel.

Giorgio watched her with meditative curiosity. 'How many different shapes she assumes in my eyes,' he mused. 'Her form is moulded by my desire, her shadow cast by my thoughts. Her aspects are protean as the dreams of fever. *Gravis dum suavis*—when was she that?' He had but a dim recollection of the period when he had bestowed upon her that title of ideal nobility. Such glorification of his beloved seemed to him now almost incomprehensible. He remembered vaguely certain remarks of hers that had seemed to reveal a profounder thought. 'But it was I myself speaking in her then. It was my ambition to offer to my sad soul those exquisite lips, that it might breathe out its sorrow through an instrument of such perfect beauty.'

He looked at her lips. They were slightly but not ungracefully contracted, participating in the intensity with which Ippolita strove to seize the propitious moment for taking the moth unawares.

She employed the utmost caution, hoping by a sudden and well-aimed stroke to pounce upon the restless winged prey. She frowned and bent her body ready for the stroke. She clutched at it two or three times without success. The moth eluded her grasp.

'Admit that you have lost,' said Giorgio. 'I will not be hard on you.'

'Never!'

'Confess yourself beaten.'

'No—and woe to it and you when I catch it.' And she resumed the chase with unabated ardour.

'Ah, it has flown away!' exclaimed Giorgio, losing sight of the airy fire-worshipper. 'It has escaped.'

Ippolita was really disappointed. The wager excited her, for all she might say. She started up and looked sharply about her for the fugitive.

'There it is!' she cried triumphantly. 'There on the wall—don't you see?' and she made a sign of regret at having made so much noise.

'Hush, don't move,' she added in a low voice to her companion.

The moth had settled on the luminous wall, and rested there with outspread wings like a little brown patch. Ippolita approached it with infinite precaution, her slender, lithe form outlined in shadow on the white wall. Suddenly she raised her hand, swooped down, and closed it tight.

'I have it—it is here in my hand!' She was as pleased as a child.

'Now, what shall I do to you? I shall put it down your neck. You are in my power too.' And she made as if to carry out her threat, as on the day of their race down the hillside.

Giorgio laughed, carried away by this spontaneous gaiety which roused all the boyishness that was still left in him.

'No, come and sit down and eat your fruit in peace,' he said.

'Wait, wait.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Wait and see.'

She took out the pin that fixed the carnation in her hair and put it between her lips; then, very carefully, she opened her hand, took the moth by the wings, and prepared to transfix it.

'How cruel of you !' said Giorgio ; 'how dreadfully cruel !'

She smiled, intent upon her task, while the poor little victim beat its bruised wings.

'How can you be so cruel!' repeated Giorgio, in a lower and graver voice, observing on Ippolita's face a curious expression between pleasure and repugnance, which seemed to indicate that she found a special gratification in artificially heightening her individual sensibility.

He recalled several instances in which she had exhibited a morbid taste for this sort of excitement. No sentiment of real pity had ever touched her heart, either for the tears and sufferings of the pilgrims at the sanctuary, nor in the presence of the dying baby; and again he saw her quicken her steps to reach the group of idle spectators leaning over the parapet on the Pincio, to look for the traces of the suicide on the pavement below.

'Cruelty is latent even in her love,' thought he. 'There is something destructive in her which manifests itself more clearly the more ardent her caresses become.'

'Look,' said she, showing him the transfixed moth, which still beat its wings; 'look how its eyes glitter!' And she turned it from side to side in the light, as one does to show the play of colour in a jewel.

'There is a beautiful ornament,' she added, and lightly stuck it in her hair.

A moment afterwards, looking Giorgio full in the eyes, 'And you,' she said, 'you are always thinking, thinking—but of what? You used at least to speak—perhaps more than was necessary, but now you have turned silent, you have taken on an air of mystery and brooding. Have you anything against me?—let us have it out—even if it should hurt me.'

The tone of her voice had suddenly changed and become impatient and reproachful. She perceived that once again her lover had been merely a meditative and isolated spectator, an observant and perhaps hostile looker-on.

'Why do you not speak? Better the unkind words of

other days than this mysterious silence. What is the matter? Do you not like being here? Are you unhappy about something? Does my continual presence irritate you? Have I disappointed your expectations?’

Attacked thus openly and unexpectedly, Giorgio's temper rose, but he restrained himself—even more, he did his best to smile.

‘Why these strange questions?’ he asked quietly. ‘Does it annoy you for me to think? As ever, I am only thinking of you and the things that are connected with you. You make my mind productive,’ he went on hurriedly, with a fond smile, lest she should suspect a sarcasm in his words. ‘In your presence, my inner life is so full, that the very sound of my own voice is unwelcome to me.’

She was appeased by this high-flown sentiment, which seemed to raise her to a spiritual dignity, to proclaim her as the creator of a higher life. Her face grew serious while the moth still beat his little wings frantically in her hair.

‘Therefore, leave me to my silence without being suspicious,’ he continued, taking note of the change produced by his artifice in this feminine soul, so easily exalted and fascinated by any ideal aspect of its love. ‘Let me be silent. Do you ask me to speak when you see me fainting under the rapture of your caresses? It is not your kiss alone that has the power of producing sensations in me, surpassing all possible limits. Every moment in your presence brings me new sentiments, new thoughts. You cannot conceive of the agitation excited in my brain by one single attitude of yours. When you move, when you speak, I assist at a succession of wonders. At times you seem to arouse in me reminiscences of a life I have never known. Vast tracts of gloom are suddenly illuminated, and remain mine like unexpected conquests. What are the bread, the food, the fruits, all these material objects that are impressed upon my senses? What are the outward manifestations of my physical existence? When my mouth speaks, I feel that the sound of my voice can hardly penetrate to those depths where my life is—I feel

that in order to enjoy true vision, I must keep motionless and silent, while you pass in perpetual transformation through those worlds which you yourself have revealed to me.'

He spoke with deliberation, his eyes fixed upon Ippolita, fascinated by that strangely luminous face crowned by the dusky hair, sombre as the night, in which a living, dying thing palpitated incessantly. This face, so near to him and that seemed nevertheless intangible, and the objects strewn about the table; the tall crimson flowers, and the hum of airy winged forms around the light; the pure serenity that descended from the stars, and the musical sigh that rose up out of the sea,—all appeared to him like a dream. His own person, his own voice seemed unreal. As on that moonlit night in presence of the wondrous vine, the substance of his life, and of all life in general, resolved themselves into the vapour of a dream.

II

FROM under the tent fixed on the beach, Giorgio, only half dressed as yet after bathing, watched Ippolita lingering in the sun at the edge of the water, wrapped in her white bath mantle. There was a painful prickling in his eyes as he looked, the steady glare of the midday sun caused him an unwonted sensation of physical discomfort mingling with a vague fear. This was the hour of terror and of panic, the hour of the supremacy of light and silence brooding over the void of life. He saw the force of the pagan superstition, the pious horror of the midsummer sun on the seashore, the habitation of a hostile and enigmatical deity. At the bottom of the vague terror, there lay something akin to the nervous anxiety with which a man awaits some sudden and formidable apparition. He acknowledged to himself that he was childishly weak and timorous, wanting in courage and power, as after some effort of strength which has not succeeded. In plunging into the sea, in offering his brow to the full blaze of the sun, in swimming even a short distance, he had

experienced unmistakable signs of a diminution of vigour, the decline of his youth, the destructive work of the enemy. He had felt once more a circle of iron tightening round his vital activity and reducing yet another zone to inertia and impotence. And the longer he watched the woman standing in the full midday blaze, the more profound grew his sense of physical languor.

She had let down her hair in order to dry it, and the long locks heavy with water fell round her in masses so dark as almost to seem violet. Her slender, supple figure, as if enveloped in the folds of a peplum, stood out against the glassy background of the sea and luminous pale sky—her profile only just visible between the heavy locks of hair. She was absorbed in the pleasurable sensation of alternately keeping her bare feet on the torrid sand as long as she could support the heat, and then dipping them, all burning hot, into the cool waves that lapped the beach. The two sensations seemed to afford her supreme enjoyment; forgetful of all else around her, fortifying herself by her contact with things free and wholesome, letting herself be penetrated by the salt water and the sunshine. How could she, at one and the same time, be so feeble in health and yet so strong? How could she manage to reconcile in her character so many contradictions—take on such diverse aspects in one day, one hour? The moody and silent woman who bore within her the ‘sacred evil,’ the astral malady—the one whose love, rapacious and insatiable, sometimes became almost terrifying; and this same creature, standing on the seashore, capable of assimilating and enjoying all the natural delights diffused around her, and of looking like some antique statue of Beauty leaning over the harmonious, crystal mirror of a Hellespont.

It was evident that her powers of resistance were of a high order. Giorgio watched her with a growing annoyance that, by degrees, assumed the gravity of a dull rancour. The consciousness of his own weakness became mixed with dislike in proportion as his powers of observation grew keen, not to say vindictive.

They were far from beautiful, those bare feet of hers, which she alternately warmed on the sand and cooled in the water; the toes were misshapen, plebeian, wholly without refinement, and bore unmistakable traces of low origin. Giorgio observed them attentively, looked at nothing else, as if the details of their shape could afford him the clue to some mystery. 'What a host of impure things ferment in her blood,' he thought; 'all the inherited instincts of her race are handed down in her, indestructible, ready to develop themselves and rise up against any restraining influence. Never shall I succeed in purging her of that. All I can do is to superimpose on her real character the changeful images of my fancy, and she can offer nothing to my lonely passion but the sensual instruments of love.'

But while his intelligence reduced his mistress to a mere motive force to his imagination, and stripped her person of all value, the same keenness of perception led him to recognise that it was precisely the actual qualities of the flesh, and not only what was beautiful, but above all what was least beautiful in her, which attracted him most. The discovery of a blemish neither slackened the attachment nor diminished the fascination. The marks of ill-breeding in her exercised a sort of irritating attraction upon him. He knew the phenomenon well from frequent repetition. Many a time his eyes had noted with perfect clearness the slightest defects of Ippolita's person, and had been attracted by them for an appreciable time, had felt constrained to examine and exaggerate them, his caresses nearly always redoubling in ardour afterwards. Surely this was the strongest and most terrible evidence of carnal obsession that one human being could exercise over another. Such must have been the spell under which that nameless lover laboured, who adored above all things in his mistress the lines time drew upon her faded throat, the ever-widening parting in her hair, the withered cheeks, made sweeter to his kisses by salt tears.

He thought of the flight of years and the chain riveted ever more firmly by habit, of the infinite sadness of love

fallen to the level of a worn-out vice. He saw himself in the distant future fettered to that carnal lust like a slave to the galley, deprived of all will and thought, degraded, unmanned; he saw his mistress fade and grow old, abandoning herself without a struggle to the slow, corroding touch of time, dropping from her listless hands the rent veil of illusion, and yet retaining, through it all, her fatal power; he saw the house deserted, desolate, silent, waiting for the last grim visitor—Death.

‘Why do you not come out into the sun?’ Ippolita called to him, suddenly turning round. ‘Look how well I stand it. I want to become really as you said—*like the olive*. Shall you like me?’

She came towards the tent, holding up her long mantle in both hands with a languid, almost sensuous grace in all her movements.

She stooped a little to enter the tent. Under the voluminous, snowy folds her body moved with feline litheness, and she diffused an air of warmth and fragrance that stung the young man’s troubled nerves. She threw herself down on the mat beside him, and a veil of salt, wet hair fell across his burning face, while through it her eyes shone and her mouth gleamed red as a ripe fruit.

In her voice and in her smile there was a shadow, infinitely enigmatical and enthralling, as if she divined her lover’s hostility, and were preparing to conquer it.

‘What are you looking at?’ she asked, almost angrily. ‘No, no, do not look at them, they are ugly. No—I will not have it!’ and she drew her feet up and hid them under the white wrap.

She had a moment of real vexation and shame, and she frowned as though she had surprised in Giorgio’s look a spark of the cruel truth.

‘Bad boy!’ she said, in a tone between fun and anger.

‘You know very well,’ he answered, a little disconcerted, ‘that to me everything about you is beautiful’; and he attempted to draw her nearer to kiss her.

'No—wait—don't look!' She jumped up and slipped away to a corner of the tent. Here she rapidly and stealthily drew on her long black silk stockings, and turning round, with an indefinable smile upon her lips, she offered her feet, one after the other, perfect in their glistening sheath, to his gaze. There was something wilfully provocative in her gesture, a point of subtle mockery in her smile. The young man understood well the meaning of that silent and terrible eloquence—'I am for ever invincible—I can clothe myself in witching falsehood which shall provoke your desire unceasingly. What is your boasted penetration to me! The veil you rend I can repair in an instant; the bandage you tear off I can bind again in a moment. I am stronger than your thoughts. I know the secret of my metamorphosis in your soul. I know all the words and the gestures that have the power to transfigure me in your eyes. With the mere perfume of my hair I can dissolve a world in you.'

And a world was dissolving in him while she slowly glided nearer, serpentine, insidious, and stretched herself at his side again on the mat of plaited rushes. Once again reality was converted into fiction full of delusive images. The glitter of the sea filled the tent with tremulous golden light; through the aperture the vast expanse of calm sea was visible, an immensity of motionless water under the pitiless glare of the sun.

Through the silence, he heard nothing but the throbbing of his own heart; through the shadow, he saw nothing but those two great eyes fixed upon him with a kind of furious intensity. She enveloped him like a cloud, and in the density of her wet hair the mystery of the deep forests of seaweed was revealed to him. Then in the final bewilderment of his consciousness he seemed to touch the bottom of an abyss where his head struck upon a rock.

Through the rustle of skirts Ippolita's voice came to him apparently out of the far distance.

'Are you going to stay here a little longer?—are you asleep?' she asked.

He opened his eyes: 'No, I am not asleep,' he murmured, half-dazed.

'What is the matter?'

'I am dying.' He made an attempt to smile. Through his half-closed lids, he saw the whiteness of Ippolita's teeth as she smiled responsive.

'Shall I help you to dress?'

'No, I will dress directly. Go—go, I will join you very soon,' he murmured sleepily.

'Very well, I shall go up to the house. I am hungry. Make haste and dress and come too.'

'Yes—directly.'

He was startled by the sudden pressure of Ippolita's lips upon his own. He opened his eyes and smiled faintly.

He heard the sand crunch beneath her feet as she walked away. Silence resumed possession of the shore. From time to time, he heard the faint lapping of the tide amongst the rocks close by, like the sound of animals drinking at a fountain. Some moments passed, during which he fought against a feeling of exhaustion that threatened to become lethargic. At last he made a violent effort and sat up, shaking his head to disperse the clouds that clogged his brain; he looked about him dizzily. He cast a glance through the opening of the tent, and was overcome once more by horror at the glare. 'Oh, if I could but lie down and never rise again!' To die—never to see her again! The certainty that a few minutes hence he must see this woman, be at her side, receive her kisses, hear her voice, was almost more than he could endure.

He had a moment's hesitation before beginning to dress—several wild projects flitted through his mind. Then he dressed mechanically and left the tent. Outside the light was so dazzling that he had to close his eyes, and even through his eyelids he saw a great blaze of red. He felt a touch of giddiness. When he opened his eyes again, the sight of the surrounding objects affected him in an extraordinary manner. It was as if he saw these things after an

indefinite lapse of time in a new existence. Under the lash of the sun the beach shone chalky white, and the incandescent sky seemed to droop lower and lower over the vast dark mirror of the sea under a dread silence, such as invariably precedes some nameless catastrophe. The sandy promontories rose like towers above the black rocks, crowned with olives writhing under the tropical sun in attitudes of rage and madness. Stretched out along the rocks, like some huge monster watching for his prey, the many-armed Trabocco looked sinister and formidable. Amid its intricacies of plants and cordage, one could see the fishermen leaning over the waters, fixed and motionless as bronzes. And the fatal spell hung over their tragic lives.

Suddenly through the heat and silence a woman's voice struck upon the young man's ear, calling to him from the hermitage above.

He started and turned round with a suffocating palpitation of the heart. The call was repeated—liquid and strong, as if asserting its power over him.

‘Come!’

As he mounted the hillside there issued from the smoky mouth of one of the tunnels a rumbling that filled the whole bay. He stood still for a moment beside the railway line, seized with a fresh attack of giddiness, and a wild thought darted through his mind. ‘To fling one's self across the rails—to end it all in a moment!’

The train dashed out of the tunnel, deafening, sinister, flinging the wind of its rapid course in his face as it passed him, then with a shriek and a roar vanished into the opposite tunnel, leaving a trail of black smoke behind it in the sunlight.

III

FROM morn till eve the alternating songs of the reapers and gleaners sounded over the fertile hillside.

The male chorus celebrated with bacchanalian vehemence the joys of rural festivals and the manifold virtues of old wine;

for to the men of the sickle the time of reaping was also the time of abundance. Every hour from daybreak to sunset, according to ancient custom, they paused in their labours for a bite and a sup among the new sheaves in honour of the generous master, and each man took from his wallet sufficient food to share with a gleaner. Thus had Boaz spoken to Ruth the Moabitess: 'Come thou hither and eat of the bread and dip thy morsel in the vinegar,' and Ruth sat beside the reapers and did eat and was sufficed.

But the chorus of women rather affected slow and almost religious airs—sweetness, grave and long drawn out—treating of the sanctity of the labours of the field, the primitive nobility of those tasks in which, with the sweat of their brow, men consecrated the nativity of the staff of life on the lands of their fathers.

Giorgio watched them, his whole soul absorbed in listening, and by degrees an unhopèd-for and beneficent influence diffused itself over him. His spirit seemed to dilate little by little with a wider and serener aspiration as the pure wave of sound spread further and further through the afternoons which, though still tropically hot, began to give promise of the calming freshness of night. It was a renewal of his aspirations towards the sources and origins of life. It was perhaps the last convulsive upheaval of his youth, a last despairing fight for the reconquest of territory now, alas, lost for ever.

The reaping was drawing to its close. Passing through the fields that were already cut, he caught glimpses of certain interesting usages which had all the appearance of some Georgic rite. One day he stopped near a field of stubble in which the reapers were tying the last sheaves, and followed the ceremony.

The field was on a plateau bordered by gigantic olives, through the branches of which shone the cerulean girdle of the Adriatic, mysterious as the veil seen through the silver palms of the temple. The tall sheaves were stacked up at equal distances in great cones, dense masses of opulent

abundance heaped up by the strong arms of the men, and glorified by the songs of the women. The task completed, a band of reapers formed a circle round their leader in the centre of the field—sunburnt, sturdy men in linen clothes. Their arms, their legs, their bare feet, all showed the unmistakable signs which long and arduous toil imprints upon the limbs. In his hand each man carried a sickle, slender and curved as the moon in her first quarter. From time to time, with a sweeping gesture of the free hand, they wiped the sweat from their brows and sprinkled it on the ground, where the stubble now gleamed in the slanting rays of the declining sun.

The chief in his turn used the same action; then, lifting his hand in sign of benediction, he exclaimed in the sonorous dialect of the country, so rich in harmony and rhythm—

‘Let us depart from this field in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!’ And the men of the sickle responded in one breath—

‘Amen!’

The chief resumed—‘Blessed be our master, and blessed be our mistress.’

‘Amen!’ they responded.

And the chief, raising his voice, and warming as he proceeded—‘Blessed be he who brings us the good food!’

‘Amen!’

‘Blessed be the master who says to the mistress, ‘Give without stint, and add “*sapa*” to the wine of the reapers.’

‘Amen!’

The benedictions were then extended—to him who had killed the sheep, who had washed the herbs and the vegetables, who had scoured the copper caldron, and to him who had seasoned the meats. Inflamed with enthusiasm, carried away by a sort of poetic frenzy, he seemed to find new and happy turns of phrase, and his words arranged themselves into distichs. The reapers answered him with clamorous applause, which was caught up and thrown back by the rocks

while the last rays of the setting sun flashed upon the steel sickles, and the sheaf that surmounted each pyramid stood up like a flame.

'Blessed be the women that sing sweet songs as they bring us the jars of old wine!'

'Amen!'

There was a roar of delight. They turned and perceived the band of women drawing near, bringing the last bounties into the reaped field.

They advanced in double file, carrying large painted jars of wine upon their arms, and singing as they came. To the stranger who watched them as they wended their way through the olives as through a colonnade with a background of sea, they seemed like one of those votive processions which file past so harmoniously in bas-relief on the friezes of temples or round the base of sarcophagi.

The graceful picture accompanied him while he slowly retraced his steps towards the Hermitage, surrounded by all the subtle fascination of the twilight, which still resounded with tuneful choirs. At a turning in the path he stopped, hearing a melodious voice drawing near, which seemed familiar to him, and which he recognised with a thrill of pleasure. It was Favetta, the girlish singer with the falcon eyes and the sweet and ringing voice, which always brought back to his memory that delicious and resplendent morning in May in the labyrinth of flowering broom, the solitude of that garden of gold where, all amazed, he had thought to surprise the secret of earthly joy.

Never suspecting the presence of the stranger hidden behind the hedge, Favetta came along leading a cow by a rope, singing as she walked—her head high, her mouth well open, and her face full of light, the song rippling from her throat as limpid and fresh as a crystal stream. The beautiful snowy white beast followed her with slow deliberation, its dewlap flapping, and its full udder swinging heavily with each step.

Catching sight of the stranger, the singer broke off short in her song and stood still.

'O Favetta!' he exclaimed, coming towards her with unfeigned pleasure as if to meet a friend of happy days, 'where are you going?'

Hearing herself addressed by name, she blushed and smiled shyly.

'I am taking the cow back to its stall,' she answered. As she had slackened her pace so suddenly, the muzzle of the cow brushed her side so that her rounded figure stood out between the two great horns as in the crescent of a lyre.

'You are always singing,' said Giorgio, charmed by that picturesque attitude—'always!'

'Ah, signore, if they took away our songs, what would be left to us?'

'Do you remember the morning when you plucked the flowering broom?'

'The flowers for your wife?'

'Yes; do you remember?'

'Yes, quite well.'

'Sing me the song you sang that day.'

'I cannot sing it by myself.'

'Then sing me another.'

'Just like that—all at once—before you?—I could not! I will sing as I go. Addio, signore!'

'Addio, Favetta!'

And she went on her way down the path dragging the placid beast after her. After a step or two she struck up her song again at the top of her voice, which seemed to reach far into the luminous distance.

The sun had just gone down, and the light that spread itself on sea and shore was extraordinarily vivid; a vast sheet of tremulous gold rose from the western horizon into the zenith and sank again towards the opposite coast. Little by little the colours of the Adriatic grew clearer and softer, till they melted into the tender green of the young leaves of the willow, only broken by the red sails, gorgeous in that light as purple silk.

'What a riot of joy!' thought Giorgio, dazzled by the

splendour of the sunset, and feeling the throb of life all around him.

All over the hillside the songs in honour of the nativity of bread continued and answered one another. Long processions of women appeared on the brow of the hill and disappeared down the other side. Here and there a thin, blue line of smoke rose slowly into the still air from some invisible fire. The scene grew solemn—seemed to withdraw into the dim mystery of remote ages, into the primitive sanctity of some rural Dionysian festival.

IV

SINCE the tragical night on which Candia with bated breath had told them of the sorcery that hung over the men of the Trabocco, the great white skeleton stretching along the rocks had often attracted the eyes and excited the curiosity of the strangers. That spiny and insidious form, for ever on the watch in the curve of the little musical bay, seemed to counteract the benign influence of the solitude. Under the burning, quivering heat of midday, and in the misty gloaming, it sometimes assumed a terrifying aspect. When every other thing was silent and motionless, you could hear the whole carcass groan and creak, and in the moonless nights the red glare of the torches was reflected in the water.

One afternoon of oppressive languor, Giorgio proposed that they should go to the Trabocco.

‘Yes, if you like,’ answered Ippolita; ‘but how am I to cross the bridge? I have tried once, you know.’

‘I will hold your hand.’

‘Well, we can try.’

They started accordingly. At the bend of the pathway they found a sort of staircase cut in the face of the cliff with uneven steps, which continued down the rocks and to the one end of the shaky little bridge.

‘You see!’ pouted Ippolita; ‘what am I to do? The mere sight of it makes my head go round.’

The first half of the bridge was formed of a single very narrow plank supported on iron stanchions fixed in the rocks below ; the other half was wider, and was composed of short transverse planks of wood, silvery white, worm-eaten, rotten, starting apart, and so thin that it looked as if they must inevitably give way beneath the slightest pressure of a foot.

‘Will you not venture?’ said Giorgio, with a curious sense of relief as he realised that Ippolita would never be able to accomplish the difficult passage. ‘Look, here comes some one to help us across.’

A half-naked boy came running from the platform, agile as a cat, and brown as a bronze figure. Under his light foot the planks creaked and bent. Arrived at the other end of the bridge where the strangers stood, he encouraged them in lively pantomime to trust themselves to his guidance, fixing them meanwhile with the piercing gaze of a bird of prey.

‘You will not try?’ repeated Giorgio with a smile.

She put one foot irresolutely on the shaky plank, looked at the rocks and the water below, and drew it back, unable to master her nervousness.

‘I am so afraid of turning giddy,’ she said. ‘I am certain I should fall. You go by yourself,’ she added, with evident disappointment ; ‘you are not afraid?’

‘No—but you, what will you do?’

‘I shall sit down here in the shade and wait for you.’ Then she added tentatively, as if to keep him back, ‘But why should you go at all?’

‘I am going ; I am curious to see what it is like.’

She seemed really chagrined at not being able to follow him, and vexed that he should go to any place which was inaccessible to her ; her feeling arising not alone from having to renounce an amusing expedition, but also from another cause which she did not clearly admit to herself. It was pain to her that even so temporary an obstacle should interpose between her lover and herself—an obstacle which she was powerless to overcome—so imperative had her desire

become to keep her lover at her side, to maintain an unbroken physical contact with him, to dominate, to possess him wholly.

'Well, then—go—go,' she said, with just the least touch of pique in her tone.

At the bottom of his heart Giorgio was conscious of a feeling the exact opposite of Ippolita's. It was with distinct relief and satisfaction that he discovered there was one spot at least where Ippolita could not follow him, one haven of refuge inaccessible to the Enemy, one fastness barricaded by the rocks and the sea, where at length he might find an hour or two of veritable repose. And these two sentiments, imperfectly defined, and even rather foolish as they were, nevertheless clearly illustrated the real attitude of mind existing between the lovers—the one a victim, conscious of his doom; the other the slayer, caressing and unconscious of his work.

'I am off then, Addio!' said Giorgio, with a shade of provocation in his tone and gesture.

Though he felt by no means very sure of himself, he refused the assistance of the child, and took great pains to adopt a free-and-easy manner, not to falter or hang back on the swaying plank; and the moment he set foot on the wider part he hastened his steps, always having regard to Ippolita's watching eye, and instinctively infusing extra warmth into his efforts, as if purposely to increase her annoyance.

When he stepped on to the boards of the platform, he felt as if he were on the deck of a steamer, and the next moment the fresh breeze from the sea lapping at the foot of the rocks brought back to his memory certain passages of his life on board the *Don Juan*, and a momentary thrill ran through him at the fanciful illusion that they were just going to weigh anchor. 'All hands to the sails!'

But the fancy was gone in an instant, and his eyes took in the surrounding objects with their wonted keenness of observation.

Turchino greeted him with a short nod, softened by neither word nor smile, as if no event—be it never so extraordinary

and unprecedented—had power to interrupt for a moment the terrible preoccupation written on that clay-coloured, almost chinless countenance, hardly bigger than a man's fist, with its sharp-pointed prominent nose between the close set glittering eyes.

There was the same look on the faces of his sons, who nodded silently in their turn, and resumed their work without rising for an instant out of their immutable dejection. They were young men of over twenty, spare and sunburned, and shaken by a perpetual muscular tremor like St. Vitus's dance. Their every movement was a convulsive jerk, and at times one could see the muscles trembling under the skin of their chinless faces.

'How is the fishing—good?' asked Giorgio, pointing to the great submerged net, the corners of which appeared flush with the water.

'Nothing to-day, signore,' murmured Turchino in a tone of suppressed wrath. 'Unless'—after a pause—'maybe you bring us good luck.'

'Draw up the net and let us see.'

His sons prepared to turn the windlass. Between the interstices of the planks you could see the water sparkle and foam underneath. In one corner of the platform stood a low hut thatched with straw, the top protected by a row of red tiles, and ornamented with the head of an ox carved in wood, with two great curved horns to keep off the witches. Other charms hung from the roofing, mingled with discs of wood, on which were pasted little round pieces of looking-glass like eyes, and a bundle of rusty four-pronged forks lay in front of the low doorway. To the right and left two great poles rose from the rocks, fastened at their base by wooden pegs of every conceivable size, crossing and inter-crossing, fixed together by enormous nails, or bound with bands of iron and rope, strengthened in a thousand ways against the fury of the sea. Two other poles crossed the first at right angles, standing out like bowsprits beyond the rocks and over the deep, fish-haunted waters. From the forked extremities of

the four masts hung ropes and pulleys connected with the corners of the great net. Other ropes and pulleys hung from spars of lesser height, and far along the rocks numerous piles were driven in to reinforce the system of cables. Innumerable planks nailed to the posts strengthened the weak points. The long and obstinate struggle against the fury and the treachery of the waves seemed expressed on the huge carcass by all these knots and nails and contrivances. The machine appeared to have an individual existence with all the air and fashion of a living body. The wood, exposed for countless years to the sun, the rain, and the blast, showed all its fibres, disclosed all its inequalities, revealed the resistant portion of its framework; it was becoming rotten in parts, white as bone, glistening as silver, and had acquired a character and significance of its own, as distinctive as those of a person on whom age and trouble have wreaked their cruel will.

The windlass creaked as it turned by its four handle bars, and the whole machine trembled and groaned under the effort as the vast net emerged slowly out of the green depths with a flash and sparkle of gold drops.

'Nothing!' growled the father, as the empty net rose flush with the surface of the water.

The sons let go the handles with a jerk and creaking more loudly than before the windlass turned back of itself, beating the air with its four brutal arms that could have cut a man in two. The net sank down again. No one spoke. Through the silence they could hear the sucking of the water among the rocks.

The burden of the curse weighed upon these wretched lives. Giorgio had lost all interest, all desire to question, to investigate, to know, but he felt dimly that this taciturn and tragic company would soon have the attraction of a certain mournful affinity for him. Was not he too the victim of a sorcery? And instinctively he looked towards the shore where the figure of a woman showed against the background of rock.

He returned to the Trabocco nearly every day. It became his favourite retreat for reverie and meditation. The fishermen grew accustomed to his visits; they received him respectfully, and had arranged a sort of couch for him in the shade of the hut, composed of an old sail smelling strongly of tar. In return he was always very liberal to them.

Listening to the murmur of the water, his eyes fixed on the point of the pole, motionless against the sky, he called up his reminiscences of the sea, and lived over again the wandering life of summers long past; that life of boundless liberty which seemed to him now so singularly beautiful—almost dream-like. He thought of his last voyage on the Adriatic, a few months after the Epiphany of Love, during a period of melancholy and poetic enthusiasm under the influence of Percy Shelley—that divine Ariel, transformed by the sea into ‘something rich and strange.’ Then he recalled the unloading at Rimini, the entry into Malamocco, the anchorage at the ‘quay of the slaves,’ all golden in the September sunshine. Where was now his travelling companion of yore, Adolfo Astorgi? Where was the Don Juan? A day or two ago, he had received a letter from him from Chios, impregnated with the smell of spice, in which he prepared his friend for the arrival of a quantity of Oriental sweetmeats.

Adolfo Astorgi was really a kindred spirit, the only one of his friends with whom he had been able to live for any length of time in perfect communion, without feeling that annoyance, boredom, and dislike which prolonged familiarity with any of his other acquaintances was sure to bring on. Alas, that he should be so far away just at this particular time! He had sometimes imagined him as a saviour, arriving unexpectedly at San Vito in his yacht and offering him a means of escape.

In his incurable weakness, the abolition in him of all free will, he allowed himself to indulge in dreams such as this. He yearned for some one, strong and imperious, who should

shake him up roughly, and bursting his fetters with one rude and final stroke, should bear him off and confine him in some remote region where he would neither know nor be known of any, and where he could either begin life afresh or die some less desperate death.

Die he must. He knew his doom, and knew that it was irrevocable. Moreover, he was convinced that the final act would be accomplished in the week preceding *the fifth anniversary*, in the last days of July and the first of August. Since the temptation which had flashed across his mind at the sight of the shining rails, in the horror of that tropical mid-day, he even considered that the proper means to the contemplated end had been found. His ear was continually on the watch for the rumble of the train, and a strange anxiety would come over him as the hour approached for it to pass by. As one of the tunnels pierced the promontory of the Trabocco, from where he lay he could hear the dull roar which shook the whole bay; and sometimes, when his attention happened to be distracted by other thoughts, and it came upon him unawares, he would start to his feet in terror as if he suddenly heard the rumble of his approaching fate.

Did not one and the same thought govern him and these taciturn men? Did not the selfsame shadow hang over their heads even at high noon in the dog-days? It was, maybe, this affinity between them that drew him to this place and these companions. Here on the whispering waters he let himself be rocked to slumber in the arms of a phantom created by himself, and the desire to live withdrew gradually from him as the heat abandons a dead body.

It was in the deep calm of July. The sea spread away white and opaque, but green here and there near the shore. A haze just tinted with violet hung over the distant headlands—the Punto del Moro, the Nicchiola, the Punta d'Ortona, the Penna del Vasto. The heave of an almost imperceptible swell made a low harmonious murmur among the rocks with measured intervals between. On the end of one of the long horizontal poles sat the child on the watch, his piercing gaze

fixed on the watery mirror under him, from time to time throwing down a stone to drive the startled fish into the net—the dull sound only deepening the surrounding melancholy.

Lulled by the soft caress of these varying harmonies, the visitor sometimes fell into a light slumber, his sole compensation for sleepless nights. He brought forward this want of rest as a pretext to Ippolita for remaining as long as he pleased on the Trabocco, assuring her that he could not sleep except upon those planks amid the exhalations of the rocks and the music of the waves.

To that music he lent an ever-intent and listening ear. By this time he was familiar with all its mystery, understood all its meaning. The faint sucking sound of the retreating ebb, like a flock of sheep drinking at a stream, the blithe and hurrying uproar of the advancing flood coming in from the open sea, hustling and crashing against the shore; from the humblest to the haughtiest tone, and the long gamut that runs between, and the different measures of the intervals, the simplest and the most complicated harmonies, and all the stops of that grand marine organ in the sounding bay, he recognised, he understood them all.

Full of mystery, the symphony of the twilight rose and swelled by slow degrees under a pure violet sky, where, amid ethereal puffs of downy cloud, gleamed the first shy glance of the stars, still faintly veiled. Here and there a wandering breeze would lift and hurry the waves a little; their delicate crests curled—stole a gleam from the luminous sunset—foamed for an instant, and sank over languidly, now with a clash of cymbals, now like crystal balls rolling down an inclined plane. Fresh waves rose in their place engendered by an increase in the wind, curled over limpidly, carrying in their curve all the grace of the dying day, breaking with a gentle indolence like the swaying of white rose-bushes, and leaving patches of foam like petals on the glassy mirror of the sea. Others, again, with an increase in speed and strength, drove on towards the shore, striking it with a triumphant crash, followed by a long-drawn murmur like the rustle of autumn leaves. And before this

stir of an imaginary forest had died away, other waves far, far along the bay were breaking at longer or shorter intervals, till the circle of sound seemed to be indefinitely widened by the endless crepitation of myriads of withered leaves.

This imitated sylvan harmony formed the fixed unchanging theme upon which the waters beating against the rocks played endless variations. The waves drove on towards the solid stone with all the vehemence of love or anger, dashing upon it with a roar, spreading themselves over it, foaming and gurgling, invading its most secret recesses. It was as if some imperial soul in Nature were breathing its frenzied agitation into an instrument, vast and many-voiced as an organ, playing on all its discords, touching every note of joy or pain.

It laughed and moaned, prayed, sang, caressed; sobbed and menaced; was gleeful, plaintive, humble, mocking, coaxing, and cruel by turns. It spirted to the summit of the highest rock to fill a little round hollow like a votive cup; it insinuated itself into a slanting crevice where the molluscs clung; it poured over the soft carpet of coral seaweed, tearing it savagely as it went, or glided over it lightly as a serpent over the moss.

The regular drip of the water in hidden caves, the rhythmical gurgle of fountains like the pulsations of some huge heart, the dull roar of the torrent imprisoned between walls of granite, the echoing thunder of the river precipitating itself from the heights in a cataract,—every sound produced by living waters on senseless stone and all the play of echo accompanying it was imitated by the sea. The tender word whispered in the shade apart, the sigh breathed forth by mortal anguish, the clamour of a multitude buried in the depths of the catacombs, the sob from some Titanic bosom, the cruel mocking laugh of derision, every sound produced by human lips in grief or joy, despair or rage—these too it imitated. Nocturnal spirits calling one to another in aerial tongues, the whisperings of goblins put to flight by the dawn, the low cackling laughter of creatures pulpy and malevolent, watching on the threshold of deep caves, the alluring calls

of flowers in gardens of delight, the magic mazes of dances under the moon, all the sounds caught only by the poet's secret ear, all the incantations of the siren of old, were imitated by the sea ; she ranged over all the languages of Life and of Dreams.

To the attentive spirit of the listener it was like the revelation of a world. The grandeur of the marine symphony revived in him his faith in the limitless power of music. He was astounded that he should have starved his spirit so long of that daily nutriment, should have neglected the sole means by which man can free himself from the delusions of the Apparent and discover in the inner world of the soul the true essence of things. It was inconceivable to him that he should so long have forgotten that cult to which, following Demetrio's example, he had devoted himself from his early childhood. To Demetrio and him music had been a religion. Had she not revealed to them the mystery of the Higher Life ? And to both of them she had repeated—though in a different sense—the words of Christ, 'My kingdom is not of this world.'

Once more Giorgio felt himself penetrated by the weird fascination exercised over him from the depths of the tomb by this man who was no longer in existence. Reminiscences of the far past rose to his mind like the strains of a forgotten melody, elements of thoughts communicated to him by that enlightened spirit shaped themselves into vague, rhythmic form ; the ideal semblance of the beloved dead appeared musically transfigured, to lose its visible contours, to re-enter into the full unity of Being—that unity which, by the light of inspiration, the solitary violinist had discovered under all the divergences of the Apparent.

'There can be no doubt,' he mused, 'that music initiated him into the mystery of Death, and opened up to him that nocturnal world of wonders that lies beyond this life. Harmony—that element superior to time and space—accorded him a beatific vision of the possibility of casting off the trammels that bound him to the everyday world, of detaching the individual will which confined him within the narrow

prison of his personality, and kept him in perpetual subjection to the base elements of his fleshly substance. Having so often experienced in his hours of inspiration the awakening in him of the universal Will, having taken an extraordinary delight in recognising the supreme unity underlying all things, he believed that by death he would prolong his being indefinitely, that he would dissolve into the never-broken harmony of the Great All, and participate in the eternal rapture of the To Be. Why should not I too be initiated into the same mystery by that same medium ?'

Images of transcendent dignity and grandeur rose before his soul, while one by one the stars shone out in the silent heavens. Some of his most poetic reveries returned to him. He remembered what an intense sentiment of joy and unfettered freedom he had experienced one day by identifying himself in imagination with some unknown man lying on a bier, raised on a majestic catafalque, surrounded by torches ; while out of the depths of the sacred gloom, by organ, orchestra, and human voices, the soul of Beethoven, the divine Revealer, spake with the Invisible. He reconstructed that marvellous Temple of Death, all of white marble, where, under the columns of the propileum, stood musicians of consummate skill, who, by their seductive harmonies, arrested the footsteps of the passing youths, and used such matchless art in their initiation that never one who put his foot on that dark threshold turned back to greet the light wherein till that hour he had found his highest good.

'Let but the manner of my death be noble ! Let Beauty spread her mantle under my last steps—that is the one boon I pray of Destiny.'

A lyric fervour throbbed in his thoughts. The end of Percy Shelley, which he had so often dreamed of and envied under the shadow of the flapping sail, appeared to him at that moment in a flash of poetry. There was a fate of superhuman sadness and dignity—his death was mysterious and solemn as that of one of the heroes of antique Greece, snatched up from earth by some invisible power, and placed

transfigured in the Olympian spheres. As in the song of Ariel, nothing in him was destroyed—the sea had only transformed him into ‘something rich and strange.’ His youthful body burns on a funeral pyre at the foot of the Apennines, facing the solitude of the Tyrrhenian Sea under the blue vault of heaven. It burns amid clouds of aromatic incense, with oil and wine and salt. The flames rise crackling into the still air, quivering and singing towards the watchful sun. As long as the body is not consumed, a sea-swallow girdles the funeral pyre with its flight. Then, when the body falls in ashes, the heart appears untouched, intact—*Cor cordium*.

Under him and all around him the symphony of the sea rose and swelled in the gloaming, and over him the silence of the starry heavens grew more profound. But from the side towards the shore a rumbling sound drew near, unmistakable, unlike any other, and as he turned his eyes in that direction he saw the lamps of the engine like two glowing eyes.

Deafening, rapid and sinister, the train passed, shaking the promontory; in a second it had crossed the open space, and with a shriek and a roar vanished into the black mouth of the opposite tunnel.

Giorgio started to his feet; he was alone on the Trabocco.

‘Giorgio! Giorgio—where are you?’

It was Ippolita come to look for him—a cry of anxiety and fear.

‘Giorgio, where are you?’

VI

IPPOLITA expressed the greatest delight when Giorgio announced the expected advent of a piano and some music. How grateful she was to him for the charming surprise! At last they would have something to break the idle languor of the long days and keep them out of mischief.

‘In that way,’ she said, with a touch of malice in her laughter, but without spite, ‘you will have no need to take refuge so often on your horrid old Trabocco—will you?’

She went to him, took his face between her hands, and gazed deep into his eyes. 'Confess now,' she said, in coaxing tones, to draw the truth out of him, 'confess now that you hide on the Trabocco *because of that*——?'

'Because of what?' he asked, feeling himself grow pale beneath those hands.

'Because you are afraid of my kisses?'

She spoke the words slowly, almost scanning the syllables, and her voice suddenly became curiously liquid. In her eyes there was an indefinable mingling of passion and irony, of cruelty and pride.

'Is it not so?' she persisted; 'is it not so?'

She continued to press his temples between her palms, but presently her fingers slid into his hair, and from thence to his neck, in one of those caresses in which she was past mistress.

'Is that not true?' she asked again, giving the subtle inflection to her voice which she knew from past experience to be most effective in moving her lover.

He did not answer; he closed his eyes and gave himself up—felt life ebbing away—the world sinking from under him.

Once again he had been vanquished by the mere touch of those slender fingers; once again the enemy had tried and triumphantly proved her power over him. To him she seemed to say: 'You cannot escape me. I know you fear me, but the passion and desire that I can excite in you are stronger than your fears. Nothing intoxicates me so much as to read that terror in your eyes and to feel it quivering through your every fibre.'

In the ingenuity of her egotism, she seemed wholly unaware of the harm she was doing, of the work of destruction she was carrying on without a pause and without mercy. Accustomed as she was to her lover's peculiarities, his fits of depression, of intense and silent reverie, of moody, half-delirious passion, his bitter and ambiguous words, she did not realise the gravity of the present situation which she herself was increasing hour by hour. Excluded little by little from all participation in

Giorgio's inner life; for all that he exalted her so much as the fertiliser of that life, she had, at first by instinct and then deliberately, made it her whole study to strengthen her sensual dominion over him. Their new mode of life here in the open air, by the seashore, favoured the development of her animal nature, exciting in her a false strength and the desire to use that strength to excess. In truth, it appeared as though she were taking a terrible revenge for her coldness in the first days and her inexperience in the first months of their love, and that in her turn she was corrupting him who had first corrupted her.

But the inextinguishable desire which she had kindled in Giorgio was burning her in her turn. The sorceress was beginning to feel the effects of her own spells; the consciousness of her power, tried a thousand times with never a failure, intoxicated her and blinded her to the great shadow that was deepening day by day over the head of her slave. The terror she had surprised in Giorgio's eyes, his attempts at escape, his ill-disguised antagonism, spurred her on instead of restraining her. Her acquired taste for the transcendental, for things unusual, for the mysterious—a taste she owed entirely to Giorgio—was flattered by the evidences of profound emotion. Once when her lover was separated from her and tortured by jealousy and longing, he had written: 'Can this be love? Surely not—it is rather a species of monstrous infirmity which can exist *only* in me, for my delight and my torment. It pleases me to believe that no other human being has ever felt the like.'

She swelled with pride at the thought of being able to call up such a sentiment in the heart of a man differing so widely from the men with whom she had hitherto come in contact. She grew great in her own eyes as she recognised from hour to hour the amazing effects of her exclusive power over this morbid temperament, and she had no other end in view but to exercise her tyranny in a mixture of gravity and gaiety, passing—as in the recent episode—from play to abuse of her power.

VII

AT times on the shore, while watching the unconscious woman so near the calm but perilous waters, Giorgio thought to himself: 'How easily I could do away with her. She often tries to swim holding on to me—it would be quite easy to hold her under the water and suffocate her. No suspicion would fall on me; the crime would have all the appearance of an accident. Only then, face to face with the corpse of mine enemy, should I have an opportunity of solving my problem. If to-day she be the centre of my whole existence, what sort of change would occur to me to-morrow after she had disappeared? Have I not more than once been filled with peace and freedom in imagining myself dead and hidden away in the tomb? I may perchance save my life by destroying the enemy, by overturning the obstacle.'

He allowed himself to dwell upon this idea: he tried to make a picture of himself at rest and free in a future without love, and it pleased him to envelop the fair form of his mistress in a fantastic shroud.

She was timid in the water, and never dared to extend her trials of swimming beyond the shallows. Sudden terror seized her if, in resuming the vertical position, she did not at once feel firm ground beneath her feet. Giorgio urged her to venture with his assistance as far as the Scoglio di Fuori, an isolated rock at a short distance from the shore and perhaps twenty strokes out of her depth. It required but a very slight exertion to reach it.

'Come,' he said persuasively; 'you will never learn to swim if you are not a little bold. I shall be beside you all the time.'

Thus he enveloped her in his homicidal fancy, and he thrilled from head to foot each time, during the various incidents of the bath, he received fresh evidence of the extreme facility with which he might translate his thoughts into deeds. But the necessary energy for a bold stroke failed him, and he confined himself to tempting Providence by

proposing this little adventure. In his present state of debility, he ran some danger himself should Ippolita be seized with fear and cling violently to him. But that probability in no wise deterred him from the attempt—on the contrary, he was all the more eager for it.

‘Courage! Why, the rock is so close you can almost touch it by stretching out your hand. Never mind about the depth—just swim quietly beside me. You can rest there and recover your breath. We will sit on the rock and pick the seaweed. Courage! Do try!’

It was with difficulty that he concealed his strange eagerness. She hung back, hesitated, wavered, half from fear, half from caprice.

‘But suppose my strength should give out before I get there?’

‘I shall be there to keep you up.’

‘And suppose you have not the strength?’

‘Oh, I shall have strength enough! You can see for yourself that the rock is quite near.’

She laughed, and from the tips of her fingers shook some drops of water on to her lips.

‘How nasty it is!’ she said, with a little grimace. But her resistance was overcome, and she suddenly made up her mind. ‘Come along, then, I am ready.’

Her heart beat less wildly than that of her companion. The water was calm, even glassy, so the first few strokes were easy enough. But in her inexperience she then began to hurry and got out of breath. An awkward movement sent the water into her mouth, she was seized with panic, she screamed, threw up her arms, swallowed the water again.

‘Help, Giorgio, help!’

Instinctively he struck out towards her, towards those convulsively clutching hands. Under her clinging weight he grew faint, and suddenly he had a vision of the end he had foreseen.

‘Do not hold on to me so tight,’ he cried; ‘leave me an arm free!’

The brutal instinct of self-preservation infused fresh vigour into him. With a supreme effort he accomplished the short distance bearing her weight, but that was all he could do. He reached the rock exhausted.

'Hold on to it,' he gasped to Ippolita, incapable of lifting her up.

The moment she saw herself in safety her natural promptitude returned to her; but no sooner had she clambered up and seated herself upon the rock, all breathless and dripping, than she burst into tears.

She sobbed wildly like a child, and this instead of moving only irritated her lover. He had never seen her weep so violently, her eyelids so swollen and red, her mouth so convulsed. He thought her ugly and silly, and at the bottom of his heart there was something akin to regret at having given himself so much trouble to save her from her fate. He imagined her drowned, lying under the water; he imagined his own emotion at seeing her sink, and then the signs of grief he would exhibit to the public, and his attitude when confronted with the body washed up by the tide.

Surprised at finding herself abandoned to her weeping without one word of comfort, she checked her sobs and turned to him.

'How am I to get back to the shore?' she asked.

'You must try again,' he answered, with a touch of mockery.

'No, no! never!'

'Well, then?'

'I shall stay here.'

'Very good—Addio!' and he prepared to plunge into the sea again.

'Addio!—I shall scream, and somebody else will come and save me.' She passed from sobs to laughter with her eyes still full of tears.

'What is that—down there on your arm?' she added quickly.

'The marks of your nails.' He showed her the bleeding scratches.

'Does it hurt?' She softened, and touched the places tenderly. 'But, after all, it was your own fault,' she went on; 'you forced me into it. I did not want to come.' Then smiling, 'Perhaps it was a device for getting rid of me?'

And the next moment, with a shudder that shook her whole form, 'Oh, what a horrid death—in that bitter water!'

She bent her head to one side, and felt the water run out of her ear, tepid as blood. The sun-warmed rock was brown and rusty, like the back of some living monster, and under the surface swarmed with life innumerable. Green water-weed rose and fell on the tide like loosened tresses with a gentle splash. A soft, insistent witchery seemed slowly to exhale from this lonely rock, which received the warmth of heaven and distributed it to its population of happy creatures.

Yielding to that seduction, Giorgio stretched himself full length on the rock, wholly absorbed for some moments in the vague sense of bodily content as his wet skin dried in the warmth emanating from the rock and in the rays of the sun. The ghosts of sensations long past rose up within him. He thought of the chaste baths of yore and the long rests afterwards on the smooth, glowing sands. O for the solitude, the liberty! for love without contact! love for some dead or unattainable woman!

'What are your thoughts?' asked Ippolita, touching his arm; 'are you going to stay here any longer?'

'No, let us go,' he answered, rising as he spoke.

The life of the enemy was still in his hands—there was still time to destroy her. He cast a rapid glance around him. Deep silence reigned over the hills and the shore; on the Trabocco the silent fishers were watching the net.

'Courage!' he repeated, smiling; 'come along.'

'No, no—never again!'

'Then we must stay here.'

'No—call to the men on the Trabocco.'

'They will laugh at us.'

'Let them—I shall call them myself.'

‘But if you do not get frightened and cling to me as you did just now, I can carry you along perfectly.’

‘No, no—they shall take me back in the *cannizza*.’ She was so determined, that Giorgio had no choice but to comply. Standing up on the rock and making a trumpet of his hands, he shouted to one of Turchino’s sons—

‘Daniele—Daniele!’

At the cry one of the fishermen left the windlass, and, crossing the plank, climbed down between the rocks and came running along the shore.

‘Daniele, bring the *cannizza* over here!’

The man heard, and, turning back, went over to where several large rafts made of wicker lay on the shore in the sun in readiness for the season of the cuttle-fishery. He proceeded to drag one of them down to the water, jumped on board, and, pushing off with a long pole, directed it towards the rock.

VIII

THE next morning—it was a Sunday—Giorgio was sitting under the oak listening to Cola, who told him that some days before the New Messiah had been taken by the police and thrown into prison at San Valentino, together with several of his disciples.

‘Our Saviour, Jesus Christ Himself, had to endure the persecution of the Pharisees,’ said the old man, shaking his head. ‘This one came into the country to bring peace and plenty, and there!—they have put him in prison.’

‘Oh, father!’ exclaimed Candia, ‘do not let that trouble you. The Messiah will come out of prison whenever it pleases him to do so, and we shall see him here too—just you wait!’

She leaned against the side of her doorway, supporting without fatigue the placid burden of her pregnancy, and her wide grey eyes beamed with an infinite serenity.

Suddenly Albadora, the seventy-year-old Cybele, who had brought twenty-two children into the world, came up the path

into the courtyard, and, pointing to the shore below the promontory to the left, said in a voice of great emotion, 'A child has just been drowned down there.'

Candia made the sign of the cross. Giorgio rose and leaned over the parapet to look at the spot. On the beach at the foot of the promontory, near the rocks and the tunnel, there was a patch of white—doubtless the sheet that covered the little body. A group of people were gathered round it.

Ippolita having gone to mass with Elena at the chapel of the Port, he had the curiosity to go down.

'I am going down to see,' he said.

'But why?' said Candia; 'why pain your heart by such a sight?'

He descended the pathway rapidly, took a short cut that brought him out upon the shore, and walked along by the sea, arriving at the spot a little out of breath.

'What has happened?' he asked.

The assembled peasants greeted him respectfully and made way for him, and one of them answered calmly, 'The *son of a mother* has been drowned.'

Another man, dressed in linen, who appeared to be in charge of the body, bent down and drew away the sheet.

The little corpse lay rigid and motionless on the hard shingly beach. It was a fair-haired, slender little boy of eight or nine. Under his head, in place of a pillow, they had put his poor little clothes in a bundle—his shirt, blue trousers, red belt, and soft felt hat. His face was scarcely discoloured. The nose was depressed, the forehead prominent, the eyelashes very long, and the half-open mouth with thick violet lips showing the large white teeth standing separate from one another. His neck was thin, flaccid as a withered flower-stalk, and marked with numerous little wrinkles. The attachment of the arms was feeble, the arms themselves of the slightest, and covered with a light down like that on a bird when it first comes out of the egg. The outline of the ribs was very distinct, the somewhat swollen feet were yellow and sunburnt like the hands, the little hands

bony and covered with warts, the nails turning livid. On the left arm, on the hips, near the knees, and down the legs, patches of red were making their appearance. All the details of the sad little body, fixed and stiffened in death, assumed an extraordinary significance in Giorgio's eyes.

'How was he drowned? where?' he asked in a low voice.

The man in the linen suit gave him—not without some signs of impatience—the account of the accident which he had doubtless repeated already many times. He had a brutal, square face, with heavy, beetling brows, and a great, hard, ferocious-looking mouth.

After leading his sheep back to their fold, the boy had taken his breakfast and come down to bathe with a comrade. But scarcely had he put his feet in the water when he fell forward and was drowned. At the cries of the other boy some one had run out of the cottages hard by and had pulled him out without getting wet further than to the knees. He had held the child head downwards to let the water run out of his mouth, had shaken him—all to no purpose. And to show how far the poor little fellow had gone in, the man picked up a pebble and threw it into the sea.

'There—just to there—not three arms'-lengths from the land!'

The peaceful bosom of the sea rose and fell gently beside the head of the dead child. But the sun blazed hot on the beach, and something pitiless seemed to fall from that brazen sky and those hard, impassive spectators on to the pallid corpse.

'Why do you not carry him into the shade?' asked Giorgio; 'or into a cottage, and lay him on a bed?'

'It must not be moved,' answered the watcher sententiously, 'not till the police have been.'

'But at least you might lay him in the shade over there under the railway bank.'

But the man was obstinate—the body must not be moved.

Nothing could be more pathetic than that fragile, lifeless form watched over by that impassive brute, who continued to

repeat the same story in the same words, throwing the stone each time into the water with his 'There—it was just as far as that.'

A woman came up—a harpy with a hooked nose, hard grey eyes, and a sour-looking mouth—the mother of the boy's comrade. She showed evident signs of nervousness and fear, as if she expected some accusation against her own son. She spoke with acerbity, and seemed chiefly irritated against the victim of the disaster.

'It was his own fault. God said to him, Go into the water and be drowned'; and she gesticulated vehemently. 'Why did he go and bathe if he did not know how to swim?'

A boy—a stranger in that part of the country and son of a sailor—repeated disdainfully, 'Yes, why did he bathe? We can swim—every one of us.'

Other people came up, looked at the scene with cold curiosity, remained there or passed on. One group occupied the railway bank; another looked down from the top of the promontory as if they were at a show. The children—some seated, some on their knees—played with the pebbles which they threw into the air to receive them again on their backs or in the hollow of their hands. One and all, they showed the most profound indifference at the sight of the misfortunes of others or in the presence of death.

Another woman came past on her return from mass in a silk dress and all her gold ornaments. To her again the impatient watchman repeated the story, for her too he threw the stone into the water to mark the exact spot.

'I always say to my children, Don't go near the sea, or I shall kill you. The sea is the sea. Nobody can save themselves from it.'

She related anecdotes of other drownings; she recalled the circumstances of the headless body carried along by the tide and washed ashore near San Vito, and discovered among the rocks by a child.

'It was here, among these very rocks—the child came running and said, There is a dead body on the rocks! We

thought he was making fun, but we went, and, sure enough, we found it. It was without a head. The police came, and they buried it in a ditch and then took it up again in the night. It was all bruised and battered, but the shoes were still on the feet. The judge said, Look, they are better than mine!—So it must have been a rich man. And so it was—a cattle-dealer. They had murdered him—they had cut off his head and then thrown him into the Tronto.'

She told the story in a high-pitched voice, swallowing from time to time with a sibilant sound.

'But the mother—when is the mother coming?'

At that word all the women in the crowd gave vent to exclamations of pity.

'Ah, yes, the mother! She must come soon.'

And they all looked round, expecting to catch sight of her in the distance along the shore. Certain of them gave details concerning her. Her name was Riccangela; she was a widow with seven children. She had hired this one out to the farmers to earn a morsel of bread by herding the sheep.

'She had so much trouble in rearing him,' said one of the women, looking at the little corpse.

Said another: 'To get food for her children she has even gone begging.'

A third related that a few months ago the poor little mite had nearly been drowned in the duck-pond of a farmyard—in three inches of water.

Whereupon they all remarked in chorus, 'Ah, yes, it was his fate! He was to die in that way!'

Giorgio's heart ached. 'Do take him into the shade or into a house,' he exclaimed, 'so that his mother may not have to see him lying here naked on the shingle under this burning sun!'

But the man in charge only repeated stubbornly, 'It must not be moved. Till the police come it must not be moved.'

The spectators gazed wonderingly at 'Candia's lodger.' They increased in number, some occupying the railway bank

planted with acacias, others mounting the arid promontory above the rocks.

Suddenly from that point of vantage a voice exclaimed, 'Here she comes!' and other voices joined in—

'The mother! The mother!'

Every head was turned in that direction; some came down from the bank, those on the promontory leaned over. They were all silent in expectation. The watchman drew the sheet over the body again. There was hardly a breath from the sea, hardly a rustle from the acacias.

The silence was broken by the hurrying woman. She was coming along the shore under the hot sun, crying aloud. She was dressed in widow's weeds, and with her body bent almost double she stumbled over the shingle crying—

'My son! my son!'

She lifted her hands to high heaven, and then beat them on her knees, and cried, 'My son!'

Another elder boy with a red handkerchief knotted round his neck followed her with a stupid air, wiping away his tears with the back of his hand.

So she advanced along the beach, bent low, beating her knees, and directing her course towards the white sheet; and while she called upon the dead, her mouth gave vent to sounds that had nothing human in them, but were more like the yelping of a savage dog. The nearer she came, the lower she bent, till she was almost on all-fours. Arrived at the fatal spot, she threw herself upon the body with a long-drawn dismal howl.

Then she raised herself, and with her blackened hand—a hand hardened by every description of labour—she drew away the sheet. She gazed at the little corpse for some moments in stony silence; then with all the force of her lungs, as if to wake the dead, she shrieked, 'Son! Son! Son!'

Sobs choked her utterance; on her knees, beating her breast in fury, she looked about her and at the bystanders with despairing eyes. She seemed to be collecting her forces in a lull in the storm.

And then she began to chant.

She gave voice to her grief in a rhythm which rose and fell in regular beats like the pulsations of a heart.

It was the monody which from time immemorial the women of the Abbruzzi had chanted over the remains of their kindred.

'Open thine eyes, rise up and walk, my son! How fair thou art! How fair thou art!' Thus she chanted.

'For a morsel of bread I have drowned thee, my son—for a morsel of bread I have sent thee to thy death. Was it for this I brought thee up?'

Here the woman with the hooked nose interposed sharply, 'No, you did not drown him—it was fate. You did not send him to his death, *you set him in the midst of bread.*'

And pointing to the hill where stood the farm at which the child had been employed, she added, 'Up there, they kept him *like a flower behind the ear.*'

The mother went on: 'Oh, my son, who sent thee—who sent thee here to be drowned?'

'Who sent him?' echoed the virago. 'The Lord sent him. He said to him, Go into the sea and be drowned.'

While Giorgio was assuring one of the bystanders that if the child had been attended to in time it might have been saved, and that they had killed him by holding him head downwards by the feet, he felt the mother's eyes fixed earnestly upon him.

'You do something for him, signore,' she entreated; 'do something for him! Oh, Madonna of Miracles, do thou now a miracle!' she prayed.

Then touching the head of the corpse, she cried again, 'My son, my son, rise up and walk!'

Opposite to her knelt the brother of the dead child, sobbing mechanically, and looking about him from time to time with a face that had suddenly become quite indifferent. Another brother, the eldest of the family, sat close by in the shade simulating grief by hiding his face in his hands. The women bent over the mother in consolation and with gestures of pity, accompanying her chant with an occasional moan.

‘Why did I send thee away from me?’ she continued. ‘Why did I send thee to thy death? I have done all and given all a woman can to nourish my sons, except my honour. And for a morsel of bread I lost thee—this, this was to be thy end! They have drowned thee, *figlio mio!*’

At this the woman with the vulture beak lifted her petticoats, and, in a burst of rage, rushed into the water up to her knees.

‘Look!’ she screamed; ‘he only went in as far as this. Look! the water is like oil. It is a sign that he was to die in that way!’ and she regained the shore in two bounds.

‘Look!’ she went on, pointing to the deep footprints of the man who had pulled the boy out of the water. ‘Look at that!’

The mother gazed in blank bewilderment, as if she neither saw nor understood. The first wild bursts of grief were followed by brief pauses of semi-unconsciousness. She did not speak, she only touched a foot or a hand mechanically; she wiped away her tears with her black apron, she seemed to be growing calmer. Then suddenly a fresh outburst shook her from head to foot, and again she flung herself upon the body.

‘And I cannot carry thee away, I cannot carry thee in my arms to the church! My son! my son!’

She felt him all over from top to toe with a slow, caressing hand. Her savage anguish softened into infinite tenderness; her sunburned, bony, working hand became exquisitely gentle as she touched the eyes, the lips, the brow of her son.

‘How beautiful—how beautiful he is!’

As she touched the lower lip, already turning livid, the slight pressure caused a white froth to flow from the mouth. From under his eyelashes she brushed away some grains of sand, but gently, oh so gently, as if she feared to hurt him.

‘How beautiful thou art—mother’s dear heart!’

The eyelashes were extraordinarily long and fair; on the temples and the cheeks there was a light golden down.

‘Do you not hear me? Rise up—walk!’

She lifted the little hat, worn and soft as a rag, and kissed it, saying, 'I will keep it as a relic. I will carry it always on my heart.'

She took the red belt. 'Now I must dress him,' she said.

The hooked-nosed woman, who would not abandon her place, approved of this: 'Yes; let us dress him.'

She herself removed the bundle of clothes from under the head of the dead child, felt in the pockets of the jacket, and found a crust of bread and a fig.

'You see now! what did I say? They had only just given him something to eat. They cherished him *like a flower behind the ear*.'

The mother looked at the little dirty, torn shirt, and her tears fell fast. 'How can I put that shirt on him?'

The woman promptly called to one of her people on the high ground: 'Bring me one of Nufrillo's new shirts—quick!'

The new shirt was brought. As the mother raised the little body, some water ran out of the mouth and trickled on to the chest.

'Oh, Madonna, do thou a miracle!' she prayed, raising her eyes to heaven in one last agony of supplication.

Then she replaced her darling as he was before; took the old shirt, the red belt, the hat, rolled them in a bundle, and said, 'This shall be my pillow; here I will lay my head at night, on this I will die.'

She laid the poor, pious relic on the sand beside the child's head, and lay down as if on a bed.

Thus both of them—mother and son—lay side by side on the hard stones under the burning sun at the edge of the murderous sea, and she began to sing the lullaby to which she had rocked him to sleep in the cradle.

'Get up, Riccangela, get up!' entreated the women.

She turned a deaf ear to them.

'My child is lying on the stones, and I am not to lie there too? Thus—upon the stones, my son!'

'Get up, Riccangela, get up!'

She rose; once more she gazed with terrible intensity into

the little livid face ; once more she cried with all the strength of her lungs, 'My son ! my son ! my son !'

Then with her own hands she drew the covering over the poor remains.

The women gathered round her, and, drawing her away into the shade of a rock, they made her sit down, and mingled their mourning with hers.

One by one the spectators separated and dispersed ; there only remained a few of the fellow-mourners and the man in the linen suit—the impassive watchman who was awaiting the police. The midday sun smote the sand, imparting a fictitious whiteness to the funereal sheet. The sea, green and far-reaching, heaved with a gentle monotony. It seemed as if the long hour would never come to an end.

In the shadow of the rock, facing the white sheet, which was raised by the form of the little corpse underneath, the mother continued her monody in the rhythm made sacred by the many griefs—old and new—of her race, and it seemed as though that lamentation too would never come to an end.

IX

ON her return from mass, Ippolita learned what had happened. She started, accompanied by Elena, to join Giorgio on the shore ; but, arrived in sight of the scene of the disaster and the sheet spread on the beach, her nerve failed her, and bursting into tears she had turned back and re-entered the house, where she awaited Giorgio's return in tears.

She was less moved to pity for the dead child than for herself, haunted by the recollection of the danger she had run just before while bathing, and an instinctive, indomitable antipathy rose up in her against the sea.

'I will never bathe again, and I will not let you bathe either,' she insisted almost harshly to Giorgio, repeating in a firm tone of unalterable determination, 'I will not let you ; do you hear?'

They passed the remainder of that Sunday in a state of

miserable dejection and restlessness, coming out incessantly to look at the white patch on the beach below. Giorgio retained the image of the little corpse as vividly as if it were there before his eyes, and in his ears the cadence of the monody chanted by the mother. Was she still keeping up her lamentation under the shadow of the rock? Had she been left alone with the sea and her dead? Before his mind's eye there rose up another mother. Again he lived through that hour in a distant morning in May in his far-away home, when he had suddenly felt her life cling close to his in the mysterious communion of blood and of the sorrowful fate hanging over both of them. Would he ever see her again with mortal eyes? ever again see that faint smile which, without altering a line of the face, seemed to draw a tender veil of hope—alas, all too evanescent!—over the indelible traces of despair? Would it ever be his to kiss that thin and delicate hand again, whose caress was like no other in the world? And in spirit he lived again through that hour of tears when, at the window, the revelation of her profound despair had flashed upon him in the lurid light of her smile; when, at last, he caught the tone again of that voice, so dear, so never-to-be-forgotten; that voice of comfort, of counsel, of pardon and boundless love; when at length he recognised the fond, the adored creature as he remembered her of yore. And again, the hour of parting, of tearless but none the less cruel farewells, when he had lied for very shame on reading in the hopeless disappointment of his mother's weary eyes the question that was too sad for utterance: 'For whom are you deserting me?'

And all the misery of the past flowed back upon him with its harrowing pictures—his mother's wasted form and swollen eyelids reddened by scalding tears—Cristina's gentle, pathetic smile, the puling child with its heavy head upon its almost breathless bosom, and the corpse-like face of his poor old half-witted aunt.

A sense of weakness crept slowly over him, under which he felt his strength ebbing away; he had a vague longing to drop his head and hide his face on some bosom—for some

fond caress in which there was no sensual touch, for leisure to enjoy his secret pain, to faint, to die by slow degrees. It was as if all the effeminacies of his soul had broken loose and floated to the surface at once.

A man passed down the path carrying a little deal coffin on his head.

It was pretty late in the afternoon before the police arrived. The body was lifted from its hard couch of shingle, carried up the steep incline, and disappeared from view. Piercing cries reached the Hermitage. Then all was still again. Silence rising from the glassy sea resumed her undivided sway over the surroundings. The sea was so calm, the air so still, that all life seemed suspended. A faint blue radiance lay over all things.

Ippolita had gone indoors and thrown herself on her bed, while Giorgio remained seated on the loggia. Both were unhappy, but neither would confess it to the other. The time passed very slowly.

'Did you call me?' asked Giorgio, thinking he heard his name.

'No,' she answered.

'What are you doing? going to sleep?'

She made no reply.

Giorgio seated himself once more and half-closed his eyes. His thoughts continually reverted to his native place. In this all-pervading stillness he felt the silence of the deserted and solitary garden where the cypresses stood up tall and straight and motionless into the sky like votive tapers, and over which, from the open windows of the deserted chambers, left intact like sacred reliquaries, was shed a chastened air of pious memories.

Once again he saw that man, so grave and pensive—that face which bore such a look of virile strength and melancholy, and the singular effect of the white lock among the black falling over his forehead.

'Oh why,' he said to Demetrio, 'why did I not obey your suggestion the last time I was in those rooms, still haunted

by your presence? Why need I have tried a fresh lease of life only to cover myself with ignominy in your eyes? How could I wander so far afield in search of the assured possession of another soul when I had yours in my keeping, and knew you lived on in me?’

After his physical death, the spirit of Demetrio had been kept alive by his survivor without any diminution whatsoever; moreover, in him it had attained to and preserved its highest grade of intensity. All that the living person had given out in his contact with others; his every word and deed and gesture; all the diverse manifestations which went to make the special character of his mind, all the characteristics, steadfast or variable, that distinguished his personality from other personalities and made him unique amongst the ordinary crowd of mortals,—all this was garnered up, concentrated and circumscribed within the narrow limits of the strange ideal bond which united the living with the dead; while the matchless work of art preserved in the cathedral of his native city seemed to place the seal of consecration on the mystery. *Ego Demetrius Aurispa et unicus Georgius filius meus.*

The impure creature lying yonder on the bed had come between them. The terrible corruptrice was not only a stumbling-block to life, but also an obstacle to death—to *that death*. She was the arch-enemy of both one and the other.

In spirit Giorgio turned his step towards his Delectable Mountain, regained the old house, entered into the deserted chambers. As on that day in May, he crossed the tragic threshold, and again he felt that nameless impulse imposed upon his will. The fifth anniversary was drawing near—in what manner would he celebrate it?

A sudden sharp cry from Ippolita caused him to start violently. He jumped up and hurried to her side.

She was sitting up on the bed in an agony of terror, passing her hands over her forehead and her eyes, as if to drive away some torturing vision. She fixed a pair of haggard and dilated eyes upon her lover, and then cast her arms vehemently round his neck and covered his face with tears and kisses.

‘What is it? what is the matter?’ he asked, bewildered and alarmed.

‘Nothing, nothing!’

‘But what are you crying about?’

‘I had a dream——’

‘What did you dream?—tell me.’

She did not answer, but only clung to him and kissed him again and again.

He unclasped her hands, and, disengaging himself from her, looked her firmly in the face. ‘Tell me—tell me what you dreamt.’

‘Nothing—a hideous dream!’

‘What about?’

She struggled against his insistence, while in him the desire increased to know.

‘Tell me!’

With shuddering reluctance she faltered, ‘I dreamt—that I lifted the sheet—down there—and it was—you.’

She drowned the last word in tears and kisses.

BOOK VI—THE INVINCIBLE

I

CHOSEN by a friend and sent on by way of Ancona to San Vito, from whence it was transported with some difficulty up to the Hermitage, the piano was received by Ippolita with childlike rapture. They put it in the room which Giorgio called the library, the largest and best furnished in the house, where there was a divan heaped with cushions, long wicker lounges, a hammock, matting, rugs, everything conducive to reverie and a recumbent life. From Rome came a case of music.

After that, for a few days, it was one long ecstasy; carried away, both one and the other, by an almost delirious excitement, they gave up all their usual occupations, forgot everything, buried themselves entirely in this new delight.

The stifling heat of the long afternoons no longer oppressed them, they no longer felt those irresistible attacks of drowsy languor; they might prolong their vigils till the dawn or go without food—it caused them no discomfort, they never even noticed it. It was as if their corporeal life were refined, that they had cast off all vulgar wants. They seemed to feel their passion grow and reach chimærical heights beyond all earthly limits, and the pulsations of their hearts attain a supernatural force. At times they seemed to touch again that one instant of supreme self-forgetfulness, that one and incomparable moment which had passed over them in the first sunset evening, and they felt once more that indefinable sensation as if their bodies were being dissolved into vapour light as air. At other times they felt as if the spot in which they lived and breathed were immeasurably remote from all known places, hidden, isolated,

inaccessible—beyond the boundaries of the world. A mysterious faculty drew them together, made them mingle and dissolve in one another, rendered them alike in body and soul, and united them into a single being. A mysterious faculty separated them, estranged them, drove them back into solitude, fixed a great gulf between them, planted in their souls a desperate and mortal longing.

In the see-saw of these emotions the lovers found both joy and pain. They rose to the heights of the first ecstasies of their love, they sank into the depths of their fruitless efforts. They rose upwards—upwards on the wings of their great illusion, and breathed the mystical atmosphere in which their trembling souls had exchanged the first mute word; they sank down—down—into the anguish of disappointment and broken illusions, and entered into the shadow of thick and suffocating mists, like a hurricane of sparks and burning ashes.

Each one of the musical wizards whom they loved cast over their acutely sensitive imaginations a fresh spell. A *Blatt* of Robert Schumann evoked the vision of a love long dead, who in lieu of a firmament had stretched above him a tissue woven of his fairest memories, and now, with sad and gentle amazement, saw them fade and pale by slow degrees. An impromptu of Chopin murmured as in a dream, 'I hear in the night when thou slumberest on my heart, in the silence of the night I hear a drop that falls, that slowly falls, that ever falls—now near, now far. I hear in the night the drop that falls from my heart, the blood that drop by drop falls from my heart when thou slumberest—thou slumberest and I am alone.' Sumptuous curtains, crimson and sombre as a relentless passion, surrounding a bed deep as a tomb—such was the picture called up by the *Erotique* of Edvard Grieg; and more than that—a promise of death in the silence of rapturous desire; a kingdom, rich without end in all the goods of the earth, waiting in vain for its vanished king, its king expiring amid the nuptial and funereal crimson.

But it was in the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* that love's breathless longing for death rang out with unexampled

vehemence, that insatiable desire rose to the frenzy of destruction. 'To drain to thine honour the cup of eternal love, willingly would I consecrate thee to death with me, upon the self-same altar!'

And the great whirlwind of harmony encircled them, gripped them close, caught them up, and bore them away unresisting into the 'marvellous kingdom.'

It was not from the frail instrument, incapable of reproducing even an echo of the torrent-like plenitude of the music, but from the eloquent interpretation of her enthusiastic companion that Ippolita gathered all the grandeur of that tragical revelation. And just as one day her lover's words had called up before her the deserted Guelph city of convents and monasteries, so now she saw in fancy the solitary grey old town of Bayreuth, set among the Bavarian mountains in a mystic landscape, over which was diffused the same spirit which Albrecht Dürer had caught fast and reproduced in his pictures.

Giorgio had not forgotten the most trifling incident of his first pious pilgrimage to the Ideal Theatre; he could revive each point of his extraordinary emotion when, on the gently rising ground at the far end of the leafy avenue, he first caught sight of the edifice sacred to the supreme manifestation of art; he was able to reconstruct for himself the vast and solemn amphitheatre encircled by columns and arches, and the mystery of the Mystic Gulf. In the shadow and the silence of the secluded spot, through the shadow and the ecstatic silence of every breathless soul there, a sigh floated up from the invisible orchestra, a moan rose and fell, and from a subdued voice came the first mournful appeal of solitary desire, the first indistinct forebodings of future anguish. Sigh and moan and voice all rose and swelled up from a vague plaint to the sharpness of an imperious cry, with all the pride of dreams, the anguish of superhuman aspirations, the terrible and relentless power of possession. With a devouring fury, like a fire blazing up out of some nameless abyss, desire spread wide and quivered and flamed higher and higher, fed

by the pure essence of a double life. All things fell a prey to the intoxication of that melodious flame; all that the world contains of great and sublime vibrated in that rapture, breathed out its joy and its most secret pain as it consumed away. Then suddenly the strength of resistance, the frenzy of desperate struggle, quivered and panted in the impetus of that stormy upward flight till the grand vital jet, striking against some invisible obstacle, fell back, died down, sprang up no more. In the shadow and the silence of that secluded spot, in the awestruck silence of those souls, a sigh rose up out of the Mystic Gulf, a moan died away, a fainting voice breathed all the sadness of eternal solitude, of longings for the eternal night, for the divine original oblivion.

And now another voice, a voice of human reality, issuing from human lips young and strong—a mingling of irony and menace—sang a song of the sea from the top of the mast of the ship that was bringing to King Mark his golden-haired Irish bride. The voice sang: 'The eyes turn west but the ship flies east. Fresh blows the wind towards the native land. O daughter of Ireland, where lingerest thou? Is it thy sighs that swell my sails? Blow, blow, thou wind! Woe, ah, woe to thee, daughter of Ireland, thou wild love!' It was the admonition, the prophetic warning of the watch, blithe yet menacing, half caressing, half mocking, wholly indefinable. The orchestra was silent. 'Blow, blow thou wind! Woe, woe to thee, daughter of Ireland, thou wild love!' The voice rang over the quiet sea, alone in the silence, while Isolde, on her couch under the tent, seemed plunged in reverie over her dark fate.

Thus the drama opened. The tragic breath which had already stirred the prelude passed and repassed over the orchestra. Suddenly the powers of destruction which the sorceress had at her command were brought out and arrayed against the man on whom she had set her heart and who was, by her, devoted to death. Her anger broke forth with all the vehemence of the blind elements, she invoked every terrific force in earth and heaven to destroy the man she

could not possess. 'Awake at my call, ye powers indomitable. O ye uncertain winds, hearken to my will! Shake from its sleep the drowsy sea, arouse out of the depths its insatiable greed, show to it the prey I offer! Break the great ship in pieces and swallow it up! All that lives and breathes, O winds, I give to you in recompense!' The warning cry of the look-out was identical with Brangane's foreboding: 'Alas, what calamity and ruin do I foresee, Isolde?' And the gentle and devoted woman strove to appease this mad fury. 'Oh, tell me thy sorrow—tell me thy secret, Isolde!' And Isolde: 'My heart is full—I cannot breathe—open, open wide the curtains!'

Tristan appeared standing motionless, his arms crossed on his breast, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon. Above, on the mast, the look-out resumed his song on the rising wave of the orchestra. 'Woe, oh, woe to thee!' And while Isolde gazed upon the knight, her eyes burning with a sombre flame, the fatal *motif* surged up out of the Mystic Gulf, the awful symbol of love and of death, which held in it the whole essence of the tragic story. From Isolde's own lips came the death sentence: 'Chosen by me, and by me destroyed.'

Passion aroused in her a murderous desire, awoke out of the depths of her being an instinctive antagonism to life, a longing to destroy, to annihilate. Enraged, she sought within herself or around her for some tremendous power that would strike and kill and leave no trace behind. Her hatred grew ruthless as she watched the knight, so calm, so undisturbed, who felt the dark cloud gathering over his head, but knew the folly of all resistance. A bitter sarcasm rose to her lips: 'What thinkest thou of yonder churl?' she asked of Brangane, with a smile that came and went. By calling him churl she thought to show her dominion over him. 'Tell him—my vassal would do well to fear me, his sovereign—Isolde.' Thus she defied him to mortal combat—this was the challenge thrown down between force and force. With sombre dignity the knight approached the threshold of the tent when the irrevocable hour had struck, when the philtre was already in

the goblet, and fate had drawn its circle round the two lives. Isolde, pallid as if a fever had drained all the blood from her veins, leaned against the couch, silent and expectant; silent, too, Tristan appeared in the doorway—one and the other drawn to their full height;—but the orchestra breathed forth the speechless trouble of their souls.

From that moment the tempest of ascending harmony began anew. The Mystic Gulf seemed to flare like a furnace, darting ever higher and higher its sounding flames. 'Sole comfort in eternal mourning, thrice blessed draught of oblivion, I drink thee without fear!' And Tristan raised the goblet to his lips. 'The half for me! For thy sake I drink it!' cried Isolde, and snatched the goblet from his hand. The golden cup fell empty. Had they both drunk their death? Must they die? Moment of supremest agony! The philtre of death was but a love-potion, filling them with undying fire. Dumbfounded at first and motionless, they gazed at one another, each seeking in the other's eyes some signal of the death to which they had consigned themselves. But new life, incomparably more intense than that which they possessed before, quivered through every nerve, throbbed in their pulses, and flooded their hearts. 'Tristan!' 'Isolde!' Thus they called on one another. They were alive; everything around them seemed to vanish, the past was obliterated, the future a blackness which even the lightning flashes of their passion could not pierce. They lived, they called to each other with living voices, they were drawn to one another by a fatal spell which no earthly power could arrest. 'Tristan!' 'Isolde!'

The melody of passion swelled and rose, palpitating and sobbing, wailing and singing over the storm of harmony, which waxed ever wilder. Dolorous yet joyful, it took its irresistible flight towards the sublimest heights of ecstasy and passion. 'Freed from the world, at length I do possess thee. O thou who alone fillest my soul, unspeakable rapture of love!'

'Hail! Hail to King Mark! Hail!' shouted the crew, above the blare of the trumpets, in greeting to the king,

who advanced to meet his golden-haired bride. 'Hail to Cornwall!'

It was the tumult of common life, the clamour of profane joy, the dazzling splendour of the morn.

The Chosen One, the Doomed, lifting his eyes, still clouded by a mist of dreams, asked: 'Who approaches?' 'The king.'

'What king?' Isolde, pale and agitated in her royal mantle, asks: 'Where am I? Am I yet alive? Ought I still to live?' Low and terrible the *motif* of the philtre rose, enveloping them, clasping them close in its ardent circles. The trumpets sounded. 'Hail, Mark! Hail, Cornwall! Long live the king!'

But in the second prelude, the sobs of a joy that was too great to bear, the hot, panting breath of exasperated desire, the bounding pulse of frenzied expectation, alternated, mingled, melted into one another. The impatience of the woman's soul communicated itself to the immensity of the night, to all things that breathed and waked in the pure summer air. The enraptured soul appealed to all things under the stars that they should keep watch, that they should take part in the high festival of love, in the nuptial banquet of its exceeding happiness. Insubmergible, the fatal melody floated, now clear, now misty, on the restless ocean of harmony. The tide of the Mystic Gulf, like the breath of a human breast, rose and swelled, then fell only to rise again, and again to fall, and slowly sink away.

'Hark! meseems the tumult dies in the distance.' Isolde only heard the sounds conjured up by her passion. The horns of the midnight chase rang through the forest, distinct and drawing near. 'It is but the whispering of the leaves stirred by the wind in its frolics. That sweet sound comes not from the huntsman's horn, 'tis the gurgle of the spring that babbles to the silent night.' She heard only the entrancing sounds called up in her soul by that olden sorcery which is yet for ever new. In the orchestra, too, the resounding echoes of the chase became magically trans-

formed, and resolved themselves into the infinite murmurs of the forest, the mysterious eloquence of the summer night. All these subdued voices, all these subtle seductions enveloped the panting woman, suggesting the rapture that was so soon to be, while Brangane warned and pleaded vainly in the terror of her forebodings. 'Oh, let the protecting torch burn bright! Let its beam show thee thy peril!' But nothing had power to enlighten the blindness of desire. 'And were it the torch of my life, yet would I extinguish it without fear!' And with a superb gesture of disdain Isolde flung the torch to the ground; she offered her life and that of the Chosen One to the fatal night; she entered with him into darkness for evermore.

And now the most intoxicating poem of human passion rolled out triumphantly, rising to the highest pitch of delirium and rapture. It was the first mad embrace, mingled of ecstasy and pain, in which the souls thirsting to be united encountered the impenetrable obstacle of their bodily substance. It was rancour against that time when love did not exist, against the empty, useless past. It was hatred for the hostile light, for the perfidious day which sharpens every pain, which favours pride and suppresses all tenderness. It was a hymn to the friendly night, the beneficent shadow, to that divine mystery which unveils the marvels of the inner world, where the voices of the distant spheres are audible. 'Soon as the sun is hidden in our bosom, the stars of joy send out their laughing rays.'

From the orchestra sang every joy, wept every pain ever expressed by the human voice. The melodies merged into sonorous symphonies, swelled out, broke in on and overlapped one another, mingled, melted, dissolved, and vanished only to re-appear. A strain of trouble and pain growing ever more poignant passed through all the instruments, expressing a continuous and futile effort to reach the unattainable. In the rush of chromatic harmonies there was all the mad pursuit after a prize for ever eluding the grasp although it shone so near. The constant changes of key, of rhythm, of measure,

the succession of syncopated phrases, expressed a never-ending, fruitless search, the long torture of desire, burning yet impotent. One theme, symbol of eternal desire, eternally exasperated by delusive hope, returned at every moment with cruel persistency, poignant, imperious; now touching the crests of the waves of sound with dazzling light, now drawing over them a tragic shadow. The terrifying potency of the philtre was doing its work upon the souls and bodies of the lovers, already doomed to death. Nothing could calm or extinguish that fatal fever—nothing short of death. Vain was each caress, in vain they gathered up all their forces in one supreme embrace, that they might merge into each other and become one. Their sighs of passion changed to anguished sobs, an insurmountable obstacle interposed between them, parted them, estranged them, and left them solitary. And that obstacle was their own bodily substance, their actual personality. A secret hate was engendered in both their souls—a longing to remove that obstacle, to annihilate it; a longing to destroy and be destroyed. Their very caresses proved to them the impossibility of passing the material limits of their senses. Lips met lips, and there it ended. 'What would succumb to death,' said Tristan, 'but that which separates us now, that which hinders Tristan from loving Isolde eternally, from living to all time for her alone?' They were entering already into the shadow, the world of realities was slowly fading from their sight. 'Thus,' said Tristan, 'we chose to die that we might live in love, inseparable, united to all eternity, resting without fear, without awakening, without name, upon the bosom of Love.' The words were distinct above the *pianissimo* of the orchestra. A fresh rapture seized the lovers and bore them to the very threshold of the empire of the night. Already they tasted the beatitude of dissolution, felt the burden of the body slip from them, felt their substance melt and float away, diffused in bliss unending.

'Be on your guard! Be on your guard! Behold night yields to day!' came the warning cry of Brangane, invisible on

the heights above. 'Have a care!' And the chill breath of morning swept through the forest, awakening the flowers. The cold light of dawn rose slowly, covering the stars that thrabbod the fiercer. 'Be on your guard!'

Vain was the cry of the faithful watcher; they heard not—would not, could not awake. Before the menace of the day, they plunged yet deeper into that gloom where no faintest ray can penetrate. 'Let eternal night envelop us.' And a whirlwind of harmony arose and wrapped them in its spiral folds, transporting them to the enchanted shore of their desire, there where no trouble clogged the impetus of their adoring souls; beyond the reach of languor, of pain, of estrangement; in the sublime serenity of their ultimate dreams.

'Save thyself, Tristan!' It was the cry of Kurvenal following that of Brangane—it was the rude and unlooked-for interruption of that ecstatic embrace. And while the love theme still prevailed in the orchestra, the *motif* of the chase rang out with a clash of brass. The king and the courtiers appeared. With the ample folds of his mantle Tristan concealed Isolde lying on the couch of flowers, hiding her from all eyes and from the light of day, affirming by that gesture his authority and his undoubted rights. 'The joyless day for the last time!' Calmly and unflinchingly, as befitted a knight, he took up, for the last time, the struggle with the unknown, well assured that nothing could avert or alter the course of his destiny. And while the king's profound grief expressed itself in a mournful chant, he stood silent, plunged in secret thought. Finally he gave answer to the questions of the king: 'I cannot reveal this mystery to thee—never canst thou know the answer to that which thou askest.' The theme of the philtre deepened the obscurity of the mystery and the gravity of the irreparable event. 'Wilt thou follow Tristan, O Isolde?' he asked of the queen openly, before them all. 'In that country to which I am bound there shines no sun—it is the world of shadows, the land of night unto which my mother sent me when, conceived by her in death, in death I first saw the light.' And Isolde; 'Where Tristan goes, there

will Isolde go also, and will follow after him, fond and faithful, in the path which he shall show her.'

And the dying knight passed to that land before her, struck down by the traitor Melot.

The third prelude called up the vision of the distant shore, the desolate and arid cliffs, and the hidden caves in which the sea sobbed ceaselessly in inconsolable grief. A haze of legend and of poetry lay over the rigid shapes of the rocks, making them appear as in an uncertain dawn or fading twilight, and the sound of pastoral pipes awakened images of a life long passed, of things lost in the gloom of time.

'What says the ancient lamentation?' sighed Tristan; 'where am I?'

The shepherd played upon the slender reed the imperishable melody handed down across the ages, and, in his profound unconsciousness, it troubled him not.

And Tristan, to whom the simple music had revealed all: 'I did not remain there where I awoke—where was it? I could not tell thee. I saw neither the land nor the people, but what I did see I may not tell thee. It was there I always dwelt—there I shall go and be for ever—in the wide land of everlasting night.' Delirium and fever shook him; the fire of the philtre was eating into his vitals. 'What I suffer thou canst not suffer. The terrible desire that devours me, the relentless fire that consumes me—oh, would that I could tell it thee, would that thou couldst understand!' And the unconscious shepherd blew and blew upon his pipes—the same air, the same notes, speaking ever of a life that was no more, of things remote and vanished.

'Ancient and grave melody,' said Tristan, 'thy mournful music was borne to me on the evening wind on that far day when they announced to the son the father's death, and again in the wild dawn when the son learned the fate of his mother. And now it speaks to me again. To what fate was I born? To what fate? And the old melody replies: To desire and die—to desire and die. Nay, that is not thy true meaning! To desire and desire unto death, but not to die!'

With ever fiercer poignancy the philtre gnawed him to the marrow. His whole body writhed in agony. At moments there seemed to come a crackling of flames from the orchestra.

'A ship casts anchor! Isolde, behold Isolde! She bounds on shore!' cries Kurvenal from the turret. And in the delirium of his joy, Tristan tears the bandage from his wound, and the blood flows out afresh, inundates the earth—turns the whole world crimson.

Little by little the long tremors of sorrow and anguish, the breathless, vain pursuit, the fruitless efforts of desire, and all the agitation of earthly misery calmed down and died away. Tristan at last had crossed the threshold of the 'marvellous realm,' at last had entered into the eternal night. And Isolde, leaning over the lifeless clay, felt the weight that had oppressed fall slowly away. The fatal melody, now grown clearer and more solemn, consecrated their funereal union.

In the Mystic Gulf the transformation proceeded from note to note, from harmony to harmony. Colours that never were even on the fairest flowers, perfumes of most delicate delight, floated up from it; visions of hidden paradises seen in a flash, germs of worlds still unborn. The delirious rapture rose higher and higher, the chant of the Great All drowned the single human voice; transfigured and triumphant, Isolde entered into the marvellous realm—'To lose oneself, to faint and dissolve into the infinite palpitations of the Universal Spirit—supremest bliss!'

II

For days together the two hermits lived thus, in a world of fiction, breathing that burning atmosphere, saturating themselves in that lethal wave. They felt themselves transfigured in their turn, felt themselves uplifted to higher worlds; they seemed to stand with the personages of the drama on the giddy heights of their dream of love. Surely they too had drunk of a philtre! Were not they also tortured by limitless desire? Were not they bound by an inseverable fetter, and

in their moments of deepest rapture did they not hear the low rumble of death drawing near? Like Tristan when he heard the ancient melody, Giorgio found in that music the revelation of an agony wherein he thought he discovered the veritable essence of his being, the tragic secret of his destiny. No man was better able to interpret the symbolical and mythical meaning of the philtre. And no man could better fathom the depths of the internal struggle in which the hero had consumed his strength—none could better appreciate the victim's despairing cry: 'This terrible philtre, condemning me to torture—I—I myself have brewed it!'

He then did his utmost to exert a kind of deadly seduction upon his mistress. He would bring her gradually round to the idea of death, would draw her, with himself, to a gentle and mysterious end in this pure summer on the Adriatic, so full of light and perfume. Isolde's last great love-passage, which shed such a broad halo of light round her and transfigured her, had cast its spell over Ippolita. She sang it constantly, now under her breath, now aloud, with every mark of delight.

'How would you like to die Isolde's death?' asked Giorgio, with a smile.

'Very much indeed,' she answered; 'but in this prosaic world no one dies like that.'

'And suppose I died,' he went on, with the same inscrutable smile; 'suppose you saw me dead in reality, not in a dream?'

'I think I should die too, of grief.'

'And if I were to ask you to die with me, at the same moment, in the same manner?'

For a minute or two she remained thoughtful, her eyes bent on the ground—then raising them to the tempter with a look surcharged with all the tenderness of her life: 'Why should you want to die,' she said, 'when I love you and you love me, and there is nothing to prevent us living for each other alone?' 'So life is sweet to you?' he murmured, with thinly veiled bitterness.

'Yes; life is sweet to me,' she answered, with a touch of vehemence, 'because I love you.'

'And if I died?' he repeated; but he smiled no longer, feeling the old instinctive antagonism rising up in him against this beautiful, sensual creature, who seemed to draw her breath as if life in itself were a joy.

'But you are not going to die,' she answered, with assurance; 'you are young—why should you die?'

Her voice, her movements, her whole person expressed a singular air of health and well-being. Her aspect was such as no living creature has except in those hours when life flows harmoniously in a perfect balance of the physical powers and under perfectly favourable external conditions; she seemed to bloom out in the health-giving air of the sea, in the freshness of the summer evening, like some superb flower that only opens its petals when the sun has gone down.

There was a long pause, during which they heard the murmur of the tide along the beach like the rustle of autumn leaves.

'Do you believe in fate?' asked Giorgio presently.

But little inclined to the sad gravity to which Giorgio's words appeared to tend, she answered in a light, almost playful, tone, 'Yes, I do.'

'Do you know what day this is?' he returned sharply, wounded by her manner.

'What day?' she repeated, puzzled and surprised.

He hesitated. Hitherto he had avoided all reference to the anniversary of Demetrio's death, a fierce and growing repugnance preventing him from mentioning that sacred name, from calling forth that exalted spirit from the inner sanctuary of his heart. He felt that by admitting Ippolita to a share in his pious grief he was profaning it, the sentiment being all the keener from the fact that he was now suffering from one of his fits of cruel lucidity, and saw Ippolita again only as the woman of sensual delight, the 'flower of concupiscence,' the Enemy.

However, he restrained himself, and with a forced laugh:

'Look,' he exclaimed, 'there must be a fête at Ortona!' and pointed into the hazy distance where the maritime city rose up crowned with light.

'How strange you are to-day,' said Ippolita. Then, fixing on him the peculiar look she always wore when she wished to calm or soften him, she added, 'Come over here; come and sit beside me.'

He was standing in the shadow, leaning against the door-post of one of the rooms that opened into the loggia. She sat in a drooping attitude outside on the parapet in a thin white dress, her figure standing out against the background of the sea on which the light still lingered, while her brown head was outlined against the glowing amber of the sky. She had the air of reviving after coming out of some close atmosphere heavy with poisonous exhalations. To Giorgio she seemed to evaporate like a phial of perfume, to give out all the ideal life accumulated in her by the potency of music, to empty herself by degrees of all perturbing dreams, and to return to her primitive animality.

'As usual,' thought Giorgio, 'she has but adopted and obediently maintained the attitudes in which I have placed her. The inner, higher life always was and always will remain an acquired taste with her. My suggestion once removed, she returns to her own nature, she becomes once more a mere woman, an instrument of base pleasure. Nothing can change her substance, nothing can purify her. She has plebeian blood in her, and who knows what low-born instincts. But neither can I ever free myself from the passion she has kindled in me—never shall I be able to tear it from my flesh; from henceforth I can neither live with her nor yet live without her. I know that I must die, but can I leave her to a successor?' His antipathy to the unconscious woman had never been so strong. He picked her remorselessly to pieces, with a bitterness at which he was himself surprised, as if he were taking his revenge for an infidelity, a disloyalty which had surpassed the limits of any known perfidy. He felt something of the envious resentment of the shipwrecked man who, at the

moment of sinking, sees a comrade on the point of saving himself, of regaining his hold upon life. For him, this anniversary brought a fresh confirmation of the death sentence which he knew to be irrevocable. For him, this day was the Epiphany of Death. He felt that he was no longer master of his actions, that he was absolutely under the dominion of a fixed idea which might at any moment suggest the fatal act, and at the same time inspire him with the necessary energy to carry it out. 'But ought I to die alone?' he repeated to himself, while criminal fancies flitted through his mind; 'ought I to die alone?'

He started violently as Ippolita touched his face, and then clasped her arms about his neck.

'Did I startle you?' she asked. Seeing him withdraw further and further into the deepening gloom of the doorway, she was seized with a strange anxiety and had come over to him.

She spoke in soothing, caressing tones, while with one arm still about his neck she fondly stroked his cheek. Through the gathering darkness he could see the mysterious pallor of that face, the gleam of those eyes. An uncontrollable shudder swept over him.

'You are shivering; what is it? what is the matter?' She left him and searched on the table for a candle, which she lighted. She then returned and anxiously took his hands in hers. 'Do you feel ill?' she asked.

'Yes,' he faltered; 'I have not felt well all day. It is one of my bad turns.'

'It was not the first time she heard him complain of vague physical sufferings, of dull wandering aches and shooting pains, giddiness and oppression; but she looked upon these ailments as imaginary, the effects of his habitual depression or of too much thinking, and she knew no better remedy to offer than caresses, laughter, and playfulness.

'What is it you feel?'

'I really could hardly tell you.'

'I know what it all comes from—the music has excited

you too much. We must not have any more for at least a week.'

'No; we will have no more.'

'Not a note.' She went to the piano, closed the cover, locked it, and hid the little key. 'To-morrow we will begin our long walks again and stay on the shore all the morning. That will be better, will it not? And now come into the loggia'; and she drew him out with a coaxing gesture.

'Look what a lovely night it is! How deliciously the rocks smell!' She clung to him and inhaled the salt perfume with a tremor of enjoyment. 'We have everything here to make us happy—and you—how you will regret these days when they are gone! The time passes so quickly—it is three months since we came here.'

'Are you perhaps thinking of leaving me?' he asked nervously, suspiciously.

'No, no; not just yet,' she answered reassuringly. 'But it is becoming rather difficult for me to prolong my absence because of my mother. I had a letter from her this morning recalling me—you know she needs me at home; when I am not there everything goes wrong.'

'So you will soon have to go back to Rome?'

'No; I shall be able to find some excuse for staying a little longer. You know my mother thinks I am staying with a married friend. My sister helps and always has helped me to carry out my plans. Besides, my mother knows that I require sea-baths—I was quite ill because I did not have them last year. Do you remember?—I spent the summer with my sister at Caronno. What a horrible summer it was, too!'

'Well?'

'So I can certainly stay with you all the month of August, and perhaps the first week of September.'

'And after that?'

'After that you must let me go back to Rome and join me there later on. I have a plan in my mind.'

'What plan?'

'I will tell you about it presently, but here comes dinner. Are you not hungry?'

Dinner was served as usual in the open air on the loggia. The tall lamp was already lighted.

'Look!' she exclaimed, as the servant set the smoking soup-tureen on the table, 'that is Candia's masterpiece!' She had begged Candia to prepare a special soup for them, which the peasants eat in that part of the country—a savoury mess spiced with ginger, rich in colour and odour. Ippolita had tasted it once or twice in the house of the old people, attracted by its savoury smell, and had become very fond of it.

'It is delicious! You will see when you taste it.'

She helped herself liberally with a show of childish pleasure, and swallowed the first spoonful greedily.

'I never tasted anything nicer!' and she called to Candia to compliment her on her cooking.

Candia appeared laughing at the foot of the stairs. 'Do you like it, signora?'

'Yes, very much indeed!'

'May it be blessed to you.' And her frank and innocent laughter rang through the quiet air.

Giorgio joined somewhat ostentatiously in the merriment. It was very apparent that a change had come over his humour. He poured himself out a glass of wine and drank it at a draught. He made an effort to overcome his repugnance to food, a repugnance which latterly had reached such a pitch that he could not even bear the sight of meat.

'You feel better, do you not?' asked Ippolita, leaning over to him and drawing her chair round to be nearer to him.

'Yes, I feel better now'; and he drank again.

'Look!' she exclaimed, 'Ortona is illuminated!'

They looked across to the distant city on the hill, crowned with light and stretching out into the dark sea. Groups of luminous balls like fiery constellations rose slowly into the serene air, multiplying themselves indefinitely, dotting the whole sky.

'My sister Cristina is at Ortona just now, staying with her relations, the Villareggia,' said Giorgio.

'Has she written to you?'

'Yes.'

'How I should love to see her! She is like you, is she not? Cristina is your favourite.' She sat thoughtful for a moment. 'How much I should like to see your mother! I often think of her.' Then after another pause she added tenderly, 'How she must adore you!'

Giorgio's heart swelled with unexpected emotion, and a vision of the home he had abandoned and forgotten rose up before him. For an instant all the miserable past returned to his mind with all its painful details: his mother's wasted face and red and swollen eyelids, Cristina's gentle and heart-rending smile, the sickly child with its heavy head drooping on its almost lifeless breast, the corpse-like face of his poor old half-witted aunt. And his mother's eyes asked again as at the hour of their parting: 'For whom are you deserting me?'

His spirit yearned towards his distant home, bending suddenly like a tree before the blast. And the secret resolution—taken in the darkening room in Ippolita's arms—wavered as before some indistinct warning when he saw in memory the closed door behind which was Demetrio's bed, and the mortuary chapel in a corner of the cemetery under the solemn blue shadow of the protecting mountain.

But Ippolita was speaking—had turned garrulous—as on some other occasions she was abandoning herself rather imprudently to her domestic reminiscences. And he, as on those other occasions, was listening, observing with disapproval certain vulgar lines that came about her mouth in the heat and abundance of her discourse, noticing, as he had often done before, a peculiar gesture she was in the habit of using when she warmed to the subject—a gesture so unlovely that it seemed hardly possible it should proceed from her.

'Now my mother,' she was saying—'you saw her in the street one day—do you remember? What a difference there is between my mother and my father! He was always kind

and affectionate to us, incapable of beating or speaking harshly to us. My mother is very violent and hot-tempered—almost cruel. Ah, if I told you all my poor sister Adriana has gone through! She always would rebel, which exasperated mother, and she would beat her till the blood came. I always managed to get round her by acknowledging my fault and begging her pardon. And yet, for all her harshness, she was immensely fond of us. Our apartment had a window looking over a cistern, and we children were very fond of leaning out of it and drawing up water in a little pail. One day my mother went out and we happened to be left quite alone. A minute or two afterwards, to our intense surprise, she came back in floods of tears, dreadfully upset and agitated. She took me in her arms and kissed me wildly, like a madwoman, sobbing all the time. She had had a presentiment when she was in the street that I had fallen out of that window.'

Giorgio recalled the hysterical old face in which the daughter's defects, the heaviness of the lower jaw, the length of the chin, the width of the nostrils, were exaggerated. He thought of the forehead, which might have belonged to one of the Furies, with the thick grey hair, rising from it harsh and staring, the sullen eyes set deep beneath the overhanging brow, betraying the fanatical ardour of the bigot and the grasping avarice of the provincial middle class.

'Do you see this scar under my chin?' continued Ippolita; 'well, that was my mother's doing. We went to school, my sister and I, and had very pretty frocks, which we had to take off when we came home. One day on coming back I found a little hand-warmer on the table, and began warming my frozen hands at it. My mother said, "Go and take your things off." "I am going directly," I answered, and went on warming myself. She repeated, "Take your things off," and I answered again, "I am going directly." She had a large brush in her hand with which she was brushing some clothes. I lingered in the middle of the room with the warmer in my hands—the dress was very becoming. For the third time she told me to go, and I answered, "Directly." In

a burst of rage she flung the brush at me, which hit the warmer and broke it; a piece of the handle flew up and struck me here under the chin, cutting a vein. The blood poured. My aunt ran to my help, but my mother never moved nor even looked at me. The blood flowed and flowed. Fortunately a doctor was found immediately, and he tied up the vein. My mother never uttered a word. When my father came home, and, seeing me bandaged up, asked what had happened, my mother looked at me but did not speak, so I said, I fell on the stair. My mother said nothing. I suffered a good deal afterwards from loss of blood. But the beatings Adriana got! especially about Giulio, my brother-in-law. I shall never forget one awful scene.'

She broke off, observing perhaps some dubious signs on Giorgio's face. 'I am sure I am boring you, am I not, with all these stories?'

'Not at all—go on, please! Do you not see that I am listening?'

'Well, at that time, we were living at Ripetta, in the same house as a family called Angelini, with whom we were very intimate. In the flat below us lived Luigi Sergi, the brother of my brother-in-law Giulio, and his wife Eugenia. Luigi was a very cultivated, studious, retiring man, but Eugenia was a woman of the worst sort. Although her husband earned a great deal of money, she always forced him into debt. Nobody knew how she spent so much, though scandal said that she paid her lovers with it. She certainly was hideous, and that of course gave some appearance of probability to the shameful report. My sister had, in some way or another, become intimate with this person, and went down constantly on the pretext of having French lessons from Luigi. Mama was not at all pleased about it, having been put on her guard by the two sisters Angelini, gossiping old cats who pretended to be very friendly with the Sergi, and in reality hated them like poison, and were only too delighted to speak against them. What! let Adriana go to the house of a disreputable woman like that! So she grew more and more

strict on the subject. However, Eugenia encouraged Giulio and Adriana in their love-affair. Giulio used to come to Rome from Milan on business. One day, when he was expected, my sister was in a great state and anxious to go down. My mother forbade her to stir from her room, but Adriana insisted. In the heat of the quarrel, mama lifted her hand, and they fell tooth and nail on one another; my sister went the length of biting mama's arm, and then succeeded in making her escape downstairs. But mama rushed after her and caught her as she was knocking at the Sergi's door, and there, on the open staircase, was such a scene as I shall never forget. Poor Adriana was carried back half dead. She was dreadfully ill afterwards and had convulsions. Mama, very repentant, overwhelmed her with attention, and was kinder and gentler than she had ever been before. A few days afterwards, however, and before she had had time to recover properly, Adriana ran away with Giulio. But surely I have told you the whole story before,' and she proceeded with her dinner, never suspecting the effect produced upon her lover by her frank indulgence in these reminiscences.

There was an interval of silence; then she said, with a smile, 'You see what a violent-tempered woman my mother is. You do not know, you never can know, how she victimised me when the struggle began against—*him*. Dio mio, what a time that was!'

She remained for some moments in thought.

Giorgio fixed upon the incautious woman a look full of hatred and jealousy, enduring in that moment all the torments of the last two years. With the fragments with which she had the foolhardiness to furnish him, he reconstructed her family life, attributing to her, without hesitation, the most sordid motives, imagining her in contact with the most degrading influences. If her sister's marriage had been arranged under the auspices of a lewd woman, under what conditions, consequent on what circumstances, had her own taken place? In what sort of world had her first youth been passed? by what intrigues had she fallen into the hands of the detestable man

whose name she bore? He thought of the hidden and squalid life of certain little middle-class houses in old Rome, reeking with the smell of cookery and the mustiness of the sacristy, fermenting in a double corruption: the household and the clerical. Alfonso Exili's prediction came back to his mind: 'Do you know your probable successor—it is Monti, the *mercante di campagna*. Lots of money, Monti!' He thought it highly probable that Ippolita would finally come to that—a lucrative connection to which she would certainly have the tacit consent of her family, reconciled to it by degrees by having their existence made easier, and being freed of domestic worry and put in possession of comforts more extensive even than those procured to them in former times by the matrimonial state of their daughter. 'How would it be if I myself made an offer of that kind, frankly proposed that position to Ippolita? She said she had some plan in view for the winter—for the future. We might perhaps make a satisfactory arrangement. I am quite sure that having considered the serious nature of the offer and the stability of the position, the old harpy would not exhibit over-much reluctance to accepting me as a substitute for her recreant son-in-law. Who knows?—perhaps we may end by passing the remainder of our lives as a happy family party round one fireside.' The sarcasm sent an intolerable pang to his heart. He nervously poured out some more wine and drank it off.

'Why are you drinking so much wine this evening?' asked Ippolita, looking him in the eyes.

'I am thirsty. But you, why are you drinking nothing?' Ippolita's glass was empty.

'Drink!' said Giorgio, preparing to pour her out some wine.

'No,' she said; 'I prefer water as usual. I do not care for any wine except champagne. Do you remember how dreadfully mortified dear old Pancrazio at Albano was when the cork would not pop and he was ignominiously obliged to have recourse to the corkscrew?'

'There ought to be a bottle or so left in the case downstairs. I will go and fetch it'; and he rose hurriedly.

'No, no; not this evening!' She tried to prevent him, but as he seemed determined to go, she said, 'Then I will go with you.'

Gaily and light of foot, she accompanied him to one of the rooms on the ground-floor which had been converted into a storeroom.

Candia hurried in with a lamp. They searched in the bottom of the case and found two silver-necked bottles—the last.

'Here they are!' exclaimed Ippolita, with rising excitement. 'Here they are! Two of them still!' and she held them up to the light. 'Come along.'

She ran upstairs and placed the bottles on the table, and stood for a moment heated and out of breath. Then nodding her head: 'Look at Ortona!' she said, pointing to the gaily illuminated city, from which a breath of festivity seemed to reach even over here. A lurid red light spread over the top of the hillside as from the crater of a volcano, while myriads of fiery balls continued to rise into the sombre blue of the sky, ranging themselves in great circles, and giving the idea of an immense luminous dome reflected in the glassy surface of the water.

'Let us open another box of Turkish delight,' she proposed, while Giorgio was occupied in removing the metal cap from the bottle.

Over the table laden with flowers, fruit, and sweetmeats hovered great night-moths. The foam of the sparkling wine overflowed on to the white tablecloth.

'To our happiness!' she said, holding her glass towards her lover.

'To our peace!' he answered, holding out his.

The glasses met with such force that they shivered in pieces; the golden wine poured over the table, drenching a pile of beautiful peaches.

'How lucky! How lucky!' cried Ippolita, more ex-

cited by the sudden inundation than if she had drunk the wine.

She put her hand on the damp heap of juicy peaches before her. They were magnificent—all glowing red on one side, as if that morning's dawn had touched them with her rosy finger as they hung ripe upon the wall.

'What a marvel!' she said, picking out the most superb and biting into it greedily without taking off the skin. The juice flowed over the corners of her mouth yellow as liquid honey. 'Now you have a bite'; and she held out the dripping fruit to her lover, just as she had offered him the piece of new bread under the oak on the evening of her arrival.

That scene returned to Giorgio, and he felt he must speak of it to her.

'You remember your first evening here,' he said, 'when you bit into the piece of new bread and offered it to me, quite warm and moist—do you remember? How good it tasted, to be sure!'

'I remember everything. Is it likely that I should forget the most trivial incident of that day?' She saw the pathway strewn with broom—the fresh and delicate homage laid at her feet, and for a minute or two she was silent, absorbed in the poetic vision.

'Flower of the broom!' she murmured, with a smile of sudden regret. 'You remember,' she went on, 'the whole hillside had been stripped of its flowers, the scent almost made one giddy.' Then, after a little pause: 'What a strange plant it is. Look at the bushes now—who would ever dream they could be such a glory?'

Everywhere in their walks they came upon these bushes, bearing at the tip of each long, slender branch several black pods covered with a whitish down, each pod containing a row of seed and inhabited by a small green worm.

'Drink!' said Giorgio, pouring the sparkling wine into fresh glasses.

'To our next spring of love!' said Ippolita, and drank it to the last drop.

Giorgio instantly refilled her glass.

'Will you have the yellow or the rose?' she asked him, with her fingers in the box of Turkish delight.

It was the Oriental sweetmeat sent by Adolfo Astorgi, made of a kind of paste, coloured yellow or rose, with pistachio nut scattered on the top, and so fragrant that one seemed to be eating some honied flower.

'I wonder where the *Don Juan* is now,' said Giorgio, taking the sweet from Ippolita's fingers, which were all dusty and white with sugar. A wave of nostalgia passed over his soul for those distant spice-perfumed isles which perhaps, at that very hour, were breathing out all their nocturnal sweetness upon the wind that swelled the ship's sails.

Ippolita divined the regret in his words. 'Would you rather be on board with your friend than alone here with me?' she asked.

'Neither there nor here,' he returned, with a playful smile; 'somewhere else,' and he rose and bent over to kiss her.

She gave him a long kiss with her mouth all moist and sticky from the sweetmeat she had not yet swallowed, while the moths fluttered and circled round their heads.

'You are not drinking your wine,' he said after the kiss, with a peculiar change in his voice.

She emptied her glass at once. 'It is quite tepid,' she said, after drinking it. 'Do you remember the *frappé* at Danieli's in Venice? Oh, how I love to see it flow out slowly, slowly, in thick flakes!'

In speaking of things that pleased her or the caresses she particularly affected, she had singularly liquid modulations of the voice, and pronounced the words with certain flexions of the lips which expresses a profound sensuality. In every tone and every word Giorgio found fresh cause for keenest pain. He was persuaded that this sensuality—which he himself had aroused in her—had reached a point at which desire, become many-sided and imperious, will brook no check, demands immediate satisfaction. Ippolita now gave him the impression of a woman irretrievably devoted to pleasure under any and

every form, regardless of the degradation it might entail upon her. When he should be no more, or she should be weary of his love, she would accept the offer of the highest bidder with the most assured position. She might even be able to put an extremely high price upon herself. In truth, where would you find a more exquisite instrument of sensual pleasure? She was, by this time, versed in every seduction, every art; her beauty was of the kind that conquers men at a blow, excites them, and kindles the most devouring passion in their blood. She possessed a feline elegance of person, exquisite taste in dress, with the most consummate art in the choice of colour and style to harmonise best with her beauty. She had learned to use certain modulations in her voice, soft and warm as the velvety tone of her eyes, which had the power to evoke dreams in the listener and soothe all pain to rest. Deep in her being she bore a malady which seemed sometimes to render her sensibility marvellously acute; she would exhibit in turn the languors of illness and the vehemence of health. In her, therefore, were united all the sovereign qualities of the women to whom it is given to hold the world in bondage under the scourge of their impure beauty. Those qualities had been rendered keener and more complicated by passion, and now she had reached the culminating point of her forces. If she should suddenly find herself free of all restraining bonds, what path would she choose to walk in? Giorgio had not a shadow of a doubt upon the subject—he knew well what that path would be. He was more and more convinced that his influence over her was strictly limited to sensual things and to certain superficial turns of mind. The plebeian foundation had remained unaltered in its impenetrable density. He was assured that that plebeian foundation would enable her to adapt herself with ease to a lover undistinguished either by physical or intellectual refinement. And while he once again replenished her empty glass with her favourite wine—the wine which pre-eminently sheds an exhilarating influence over ‘little suppers’ and the more pronounced private orgies of the fast world—his imagination

attributed the most outrageous excesses to 'the Romana, pale and voracious, unrivalled in the art of breaking the reins of men.'

'How your hand shakes,' remarked Ippolita, watching him.

'So it does,' he answered, with assumed gaiety. 'I have had just a little drop too much, you know—and you are not drinking anything. That is not fair!'

She laughed, and drank a third glass with childish glee at the thought of becoming intoxicated, of feeling her senses cloud over by degrees. The fumes of the wine were already mounting to her head, the demon of hysteria was beginning to stir in her.

'Look how brown I am!' she exclaimed, pushing her wide white sleeves up to the elbow. 'Just look at my hands!'

Although her skin was brown in tone—a warm, pale gold—that on her hands was remarkably fine and very much whiter—peculiarly pale. The sun had burned her arms where they were at all exposed, but her hands had remained white, and through the transparent skin the veins shone, fine but perfectly visible, of an intense blue, almost approaching to violet. Looking at them Giorgio often thought of Cleopatra's words to the messenger from Italy: 'And here my bluest veins to kiss.'

Ippolita held out her two hands to him. 'Kiss!' she said.

He caught one of them, and made a pass with his knife as if to cut it off at the wrist.

'Cut away,' she said fearlessly; 'I shall not move.'

As he made the pass he gazed earnestly at the delicate blue lines under the skin, which was so white it seemed as if it must belong to another body, to a fair woman. This peculiarity attracted him, offered him an æsthetic temptation, suggesting to him an image of tragic beauty.

'That is your vulnerable spot,' he said, with a smile. 'It is a sure sign—you will die of loss of blood. Give me the other one.' He placed the two hands together, and made as if he would sever them both at a stroke. The picture rose up

in complete detail before him. On the marble threshold of a doorway, dark with shadow and expectation, appeared the woman who was about to die, her arms extended, and from her wrists, where the pulse arteries had been severed, two crimson jets sprang up and throbbed. Between these two crimson fountains the face slowly assumed a sepulchral pallor, the hollow eyes filled with infinite mystery, the wraith of an ineffable word hovered over the set lips. Suddenly the fountains ceased to flow, the bloodless body fell back into the shadow.

'Tell me your thought!' Ippolita entreated, seeing him so absorbed.

He described his vision.

'Most beautiful!' she exclaimed enthusiastically, as if before a picture.

She lit a cigarette and blew a little cloud of smoke among the night-moths fluttering round the lamp. For a moment she watched the agitation of the crowd of little speckled wings through the floating veil of smoke, and then turned towards Ortona, which blazed with light. She rose from her chair and looked up at the stars.

'What a hot night!' she exclaimed, with a deep breath. 'Are you not hot?'

She threw away the cigarette and bared her arms again. She came over to where he sat, and drawing back his head, enveloped him in a long caress, letting her warm soft languorous mouth wander over his face in a reiterated kiss. With feline suppleness she hung round him, wound herself about him, and with a movement so sudden and furtive as to be almost inexplicable she was seated on his knee, and he could feel the soft outline of her form through the thin dress. He trembled in every limb as he had done just now when she twined her arms about him in the twilight-shadowed room.

'No, no; get up,' he faltered, pushing her away, 'somebody will see us.'

She slid from his knee and stood up, swaying a little as she did so. She really seemed slightly intoxicated, a vapour

passed across her eyes and over her brain, obscuring both sight and sense.

'How hot it is!' she sighed, pressing her palms to her forehead and her burning cheeks.

Meanwhile Giorgio, still possessed by a fixed idea, kept repeating to himself, 'Ought I to die alone?' As the evening advanced, the urgency for the dread deed grew stronger in him. Behind him in the room he heard the ticking of a clock, he heard the regular beats of the flax-dressers in a distant barn. The two regular, similar sounds sharpened his consciousness of the flight of time, and awakened in him a sort of anxious terror.

'Look, they are letting off the fireworks at Ortona,' exclaimed Ippolita, pointing to the festive city flaming into the sky. 'What a quantity!'

A burst of rockets, starting from a central point, rushed up into the heavens and spread like a great fan of gold, slowly dissolving in a shower of separate stars into the midst of which a second fan shot up and dispersed, only to form again, while the waters reflected the changing scene. It was accompanied by a dull crackling like the rattle of distant musketry, broken by loud reports following on the explosion of a crowd of many-coloured balls high up in the air; and after each report, the town, the harbour, the long breakwater appeared fantastically transfigured in a different coloured light.

Standing erect and slender against the parapet, Ippolita admired the dazzling spectacle and greeted the more brilliant efforts with exclamations of delight. From time to time a light as of some conflagration spread itself over her.

'She is ever-excited, a little intoxicated, ready to commit any folly,' thought Giorgio, as he watched her. 'I might propose a walk which she has often been anxious to take—to go through one of the tunnels by torchlight. I can get the torch at the Trabocco. She will wait for me at this side of the little bridge, and I will then take her to the tunnel by a path I know of. I shall manage it so that the train surprises us there—an imprudence—an accident.'

The scheme seemed to him feasible enough ; it sprang into his mind fully formed as though it had been waiting ready under his consciousness from the moment when, standing by the gleaming rails, it had occurred to him for the first time. 'She must die with me' ; that determination was fixed—relentless. The ticking of the clock behind him filled him with apprehension which he was incapable of quelling. It must be near the time—they would barely be able to get down—he must act without delay—must find out, at once what o'clock it was. But he seemed unable to stir from his seat ; he felt that his voice would fail him if he attempted to address the unconscious woman.

He sprang to his feet at the sound of a distant rumbling. Too late ! and his heart beat to suffocation, till he thought he must die of it, while the rumbling and the whistle drew ever nearer.

Ippolita turned round to him. 'There is the train,' she said, 'come and look at it.'

He came and stood at her side, and she wound her bare arm about his neck, leaning her head on his shoulder.

'It is going into the tunnel now,' she said, noticing the difference in the sound.

To his ears the sound increased to a deafening roar. As in a dream he saw himself and his mistress standing in the dark tunnel—the rapid approach of the two lamps through the blackness, the brief struggle on the rails, the fall together, and the bodies crushed by the hideous grinding of the wheels. And all the while, he felt the contact of the woman at his side—subtle, caressing, for ever triumphant—and his physical horror of the barbarous death he contemplated was mingled with a sullen grudge against her who seemed to be slipping from his grasp.

They leaned over the parapet together and watched the train rush past, rapid and sinister, shaking the house to its foundations and even communicating the tremor to them where they stood.

'I am quite frightened in the night when it shakes the

house like that,' said Ippolita, pressing closer to her lover's side, 'are not you?'

He did not hear her. A frightful tumult was going on in his mind—the fiercest, darkest struggle that had ever convulsed his soul. Thoughts—visions darted incoherently through his brain, and his heart writhed under a thousand cruel stabs. But one thought remained stationary and gradually dominated the rest, occupying the centre-point of his mind. 'What was he doing five years ago at this hour?' He was watching by a corpse; he was gazing at a face covered by a black veil, and at a long pallid hand.

Ippolita's haunting fingers were upon him, twining in his hair, touching his neck. On his neck, on his ear, he felt her soft warm lips. With an instinctive movement, impossible to repress, he pushed her from him, drew away from her; and she laughed—that singular, shameless laugh that gleamed and rang on her lips if ever her lover repulsed her caresses. And once again he seemed to hear those slow and liquid words—'For fear of my kisses.'

A dull crackling sound mingled with distinct reports reached them from the illuminated city. The fireworks had recommenced. Ippolita's attention was attracted once more to the spectacle.

'Oh, look—you would think Ortona was in flames!'

A great glare of red spread across the sky and was reflected in the still water, the lurid city being sharply outlined in its midst. Rockets streamed up in ceaseless fountains, the balls burst into great roses of splendour.

'And must I pass another night?' Giorgio asked himself. 'Must I take up life again to-morrow morning, and for how long?'

A more than usually brilliant burst of light recalled his eyes to what was going on around him. A vast rose like the full moon hung over the city and illuminated the shore below, with all its little crescent-shaped bays and sharp promontories, as far as the eye could reach. The points of del Moro, la Nicchiola, il Trabocco, the rocks both far and near, right

away to the Penna del Vasto, were clearly visible for several seconds.

'The promontory,' some secret voice suddenly suggested to Giorgio as his eyes fell on the familiar spot crowned by the writhing olives.

The white refulgences died quickly away; silence fell upon the distant city, though it was still visible through the night by its illuminated houses. In the silence Giorgio heard again the ticking of the clock and the rhythmical strokes of the flax-threshers; but by this time he was able to control his agitation, he felt himself stronger and clearer-headed.

'Shall we go for a little walk?' he asked of Ippolita with a scarcely perceptible change in his voice. 'We might go to some secluded part of the hillside where we could sit down and enjoy the cool air. See, the night is almost as clear as if there were a moon.'

'No, no,' she answered carelessly; 'let us stay here.'

'It is early yet. Are you sleepy? You know it does not agree with me to go to bed too soon. I cannot sleep, it makes me feel ill. I would so much enjoy a little walk. Come, do not be so lazy; you can come just as you are, you need not bother to dress.'

'No, no; let us stay where we are.' And once more she slipped her bare arm round his neck, with a clinging touch full of languorous desire. 'Stay here; come and sit beside me on the divan.'

She was all love and beauty—her beauty had kindled like a torch. Her lithe serpentine body vibrated through the delicate filminess of her white dress. Her great dark eyes glowed with the magical light which belongs only to hours of supreme passion. She was Lust triumphant. 'I am for ever invincible; I am stronger than all thought. My perfume has the power to dissolve a world in thee!'

'No, no; I would rather not,' persisted Giorgio, grasping her clinging hands almost roughly, with a firmness he was unable to moderate.

'Ah; you would rather not?' she retorted mockingly, but

amused by the contest, sure of ultimate victory, incapable of renouncing the caprice of the moment.

He regretted his roughness ; if he would succeed in drawing her into the trap, he must show himself gentle and affectionate, must simulate tenderness and ardour. He would then certainly be able to persuade her to the nocturnal walk—the last walk. But neither, on the other hand, dared he risk losing in her embraces his momentary access of nervous energy which was absolutely indispensable for the carrying out of the contemplated action.

‘Ah, so you would rather not stay indoors,’ she repeated, twining herself about him and looking him close in the eyes with a sort of suppressed fury.

Giorgio allowed her to draw him into the room, where he sank down on the divan at her side ; he felt that all was lost, when suddenly she was seized with hysterical laughter, frenzied, uncontrollable, ghastly, as the laughter of madness.

Startled and horrified, he looked at her. ‘Has she gone mad?’ he thought.

She laughed, and laughed, and laughed, writhing, covering her face with her hands, biting her fingers, holding her hands to her sides, shaken, in between, by long-drawn sobs.

At intervals she managed to stop herself for a moment, only to begin again with redoubled violence. Anything more lugubrious than those peals of demented laughter ringing out into the solemn silence of the night would be impossible to imagine.

‘Do not be frightened—do not be frightened,’ she gasped in one of these intervals, seeing her lover shocked and bewildered. ‘I shall get over it presently ; go away—please go.’

He went out to the loggia as in a dream, and yet his mind was singularly clear and active. His every movement, everything he saw and heard, had a dream-like unreality to him, and at the same time a significance as profound as that of an allegory. The peals of laughter continued behind him, but more faintly now ; above him and around him he saw the

beauty of the summer night. He knew what was about to be accomplished.

The laughter ceased. In the silence he heard again the swing of the pendulum and the threshing of the flax in the distant barn. A moan of pain from the old people's house made him start. Candia's hour had come.

'It must be done,' he thought; and, turning on his heel, entered the room again with a firm step.

Ippolita was lying on the sofa composed but very pale, and with half-closed eyes. She smiled feebly as she heard her lover's step. 'Come; sit down beside me,' she said, with a vague gesture of invitation. Leaning over her, Giorgio saw her eyes still wet with tears.

He seated himself at her side. 'Are you in pain?' he asked.

'I feel rather choked,' she answered; 'a weight here like a ball keeps rising and going down again.' She laid her hand on her breast.

'It is simply stifling indoors,' he remarked; 'do you think you have the strength to rise and come out? The fresh air would do you good. It is a splendid night. Come, dear.' He rose and held out his hands to her, which she took, and let him draw her to her feet. She shook back her long hair which had become loosened and fell about her face; then she bent over the sofa searching for the scattered hair-pins. 'Where can they all be?'

'What are you looking for?'

'My hair-pins.'

'Leave them; you will find them to-morrow in the daylight.'

'But how am I to fasten up my hair without them?'

'Leave it hanging down—I like it.'

She smiled, and they went outside on to the loggia. She lifted her face to the stars and inhaled the delicious freshness of the summer night.

'You see what a lovely night it is,' said Giorgio in a husky but gentle voice.

'They are threshing the flax,' said Ippolita, noticing the sound of the regular thuds.

'Let us go down,' said Giorgio. 'We will take a little walk—as far as the olives over there.'

He hung upon Ippolita's lips.

'No, let us stay here. I am really not fit to go out like this.'

'You need not mind that. Who is to see us? At this hour we shall not meet a living soul. You can go just as you are. I am going without a hat. The country here is just like one's own garden. Come along.'

She still hung back; but she too felt the necessity of a change of air, of getting away from the house for a while where she still seemed to hear the echo of her horrid laughter.

'Very well,' she assented finally.

Giorgio's heart stood still.

Instinctively he turned towards the open door of the lighted room, and cast into it one last agonised look—a look of farewell. A tempest of memories broke over his unhappy soul.

'Shall we leave the lamp lighted?' he asked without thinking of what he was saying, his own voice sounding to him indefinitely unfamiliar and far away.

'Yes,' answered Ippolita.

They descended the stairs hand in hand, slowly, step by step. The effort which Giorgio made to conceal his perturbation was so violent as to engender a strange excitement in him. He gazed at the immensity of the nocturnal sky, and he fancied it filled with the intensity of his own life.

Against the parapet of the courtyard stood a man, motionless and silent, in whom they recognised old Cola.

'You here at this hour, Cola!' exclaimed Ippolita; 'can you not sleep?'

'I am waiting up because of Candia,' he replied.

'Is she going on well?'

'Very well.'

A light shone from the cottage.

'Wait a minute,' said Ippolita, 'I am just going in to see Candia.'

'No, do not go now,' begged Giorgio; 'you can see her on the way back.'

'So I can; on the way back, then. Addio, Cola.'

Going down the narrow pathway she stumbled. 'Take care!' came a warning voice from the old man's shadow.

'Will you not take my arm?' asked Giorgio.

She slipped her hand through his arm, and they proceeded for a little way in silence.

The night was clear and resplendent in all its starry crowns.

The Great Bear gleamed over their heads in its seven-fold mystery. Mute and pure as the over-arching sky, the Adriatic made its presence felt solely by the slow heaving of its bosom and its invigorating breath.

'Why do you hurry so?' asked Ippolita.

Giorgio instantly slackened his pace. Possessed by one overruling idea, egged on by the necessity for prompt action, he had but a confused sense of all the rest. His inner life seemed to detach itself, to fall to pieces, to dissolve in a ferment which spread to the deepest strata of his being, casting up to the surface shapeless fragments of totally diverse nature, unrecognisable as forming a part of the life of the same man. Of all these strange things, so inextricably mixed and jostling one another so violently, he was dimly aware as in a dream; but one point shone clear through the prevailing darkness of his mind and guided his steps with unerring directness to the final act.

'How dreadfully depressing that sound is,' said Ippolita, stopping in her walk. 'They thresh the flax the whole night through. Does it not depress you?'

She hung upon his arm, her hair sweeping his cheek. 'Do you remember, at Albano, how the stone-breakers thumped upon the road under our windows from morning till night?' Her voice was veiled with sadness and a little tired.

'The sound sometimes even lulled us to sleep. . . .' She broke off nervously. 'Why do you keep turning round?'

'It seemed to hear some one following us, with bare feet,' Giorgio answered in a whisper, and he felt the roots of his hair stir. 'Let us wait here a moment.'

They stood still and listened.

Giorgio was again under the dominion of that horror which had held him frozen on the threshold of his uncle's tragic room. His whole being agitated, fascinated by the mystery, feeling that he had already passed the confines of an unknown world.

'It is only Giardino,' said Ippolita, catching sight of the dog; 'he has followed us.'

She called to the sagacious creature, who came bounding towards her, and bent down to fondle him.

'He will never forsake his friend, will he?' she said in that peculiar tone of voice she always used towards animals of whom she was fond. 'He will never forsake his own friend, will he?—never?'

The delighted dog rolled in the dust at her feet.

Giorgio went on a step or two, inexpressibly relieved to be free of the contact of Ippolita's arm which had caused him an indefinable sensation of physical discomfort. He thought of the sudden violent act he was about to accomplish, the deadly clasp of his arms about this woman's body, and he would have wished not to touch her till the last moment.

'Come—let us go on—we are just there,' he said, walking on in front of her towards the olives gleaming white under the soft radiance of the stars.

Arrived at the further end of the little platform, he turned round to make sure that Ippolita was following him. Once more he cast an agonised look around him, as if to embrace, for the last time, the image of the night. The silence seemed to him more profound on this spot than elsewhere, broken only by the faint sound of the threshing in the distant barn.

'Come along!' he called in a clear, ringing voice, filled with sudden energy. And passing between the gnarled trunks of the olives, feeling the thick soft carpet of the grass beneath his feet, he made his way to the edge of the precipice.

The whole circle of the margin was free and open, without any protecting barrier. Planting his hands firmly on his knees, he leaned forward cautiously and looked over. Below him he saw the jagged rocks and a corner of sandy beach. He seemed to see the little corpse stretched out upon the shingle; there, too, was the black patch he and Ippolita had seen from the Pincio on the pavement at the foot of the wall, and he heard again the answer of the carter to the man with the jaundiced face. All the phantoms of that afternoon so long ago flitted vaguely through his mind.

'Take care!' cried Ippolita, coming up with him at that moment. 'Do take care!'

The dog barked among the olives.

'Giorgio, do you hear? Keep back!'

The promontory fell sheer down to the desolate black rocks round which the sluggish water heaved with a faint splash, rocking the reflection of the stars upon its bosom.

'Giorgio! Giorgio!'

'You need not be afraid,' he answered in a hoarse voice. 'Come here—come closer! Look at the men fishing among the rocks by torchlight.'

'No, no. I am afraid of turning giddy.'

'Oh, do come. I will hold you fast.'

'No—no.' Something in the tone of his voice seemed to strike her; she began to feel vaguely frightened.

'Why do you not come?'

He turned and came towards her with outstretched hands. With a sudden rapid movement he clutched her wrists and dragged her forward, then, throwing his arms round her, made a dash for the edge of the precipice.

'No—no—no!' She made a frantic resistance, and, succeeding in disengaging herself from his grasp, sprang back breathless and trembling.

'Are you mad?' she cried, half choked with rage and fear. 'Are you mad?'

But when she saw him seize her again without a word, felt herself dragged in a more brutal grasp towards the abyss, she

understood—in a sudden baleful flash that struck terror to her soul.

‘No, Giorgio—no—let me go—let me go. One minute—listen, listen—just one minute—I want to tell you—’

Mad with fright, she writhed and supplicated, hoping against hope to stop him—to soften him.

‘One minute—listen to me—I love you! Oh, forgive me—forgive me.’

She stammered wild, incoherent, despairing words—feeling her strength fail her, losing the ground beneath her feet—death staring her in the face.

‘Murderer!’ she shrieked, defending herself desperately—with her teeth, her nails, like a wild beast.

‘Murderer!’ she shrieked again, seized by the hair, thrown on her knees at the very edge of the abyss—lost.

The dog barked furiously at the tragic group.

There was a brief but savage struggle, as between two mortal foes who had nourished a secret and implacable hatred in their souls up till that hour. . . .

Then they crashed down headlong into death, locked in that fierce embrace.

